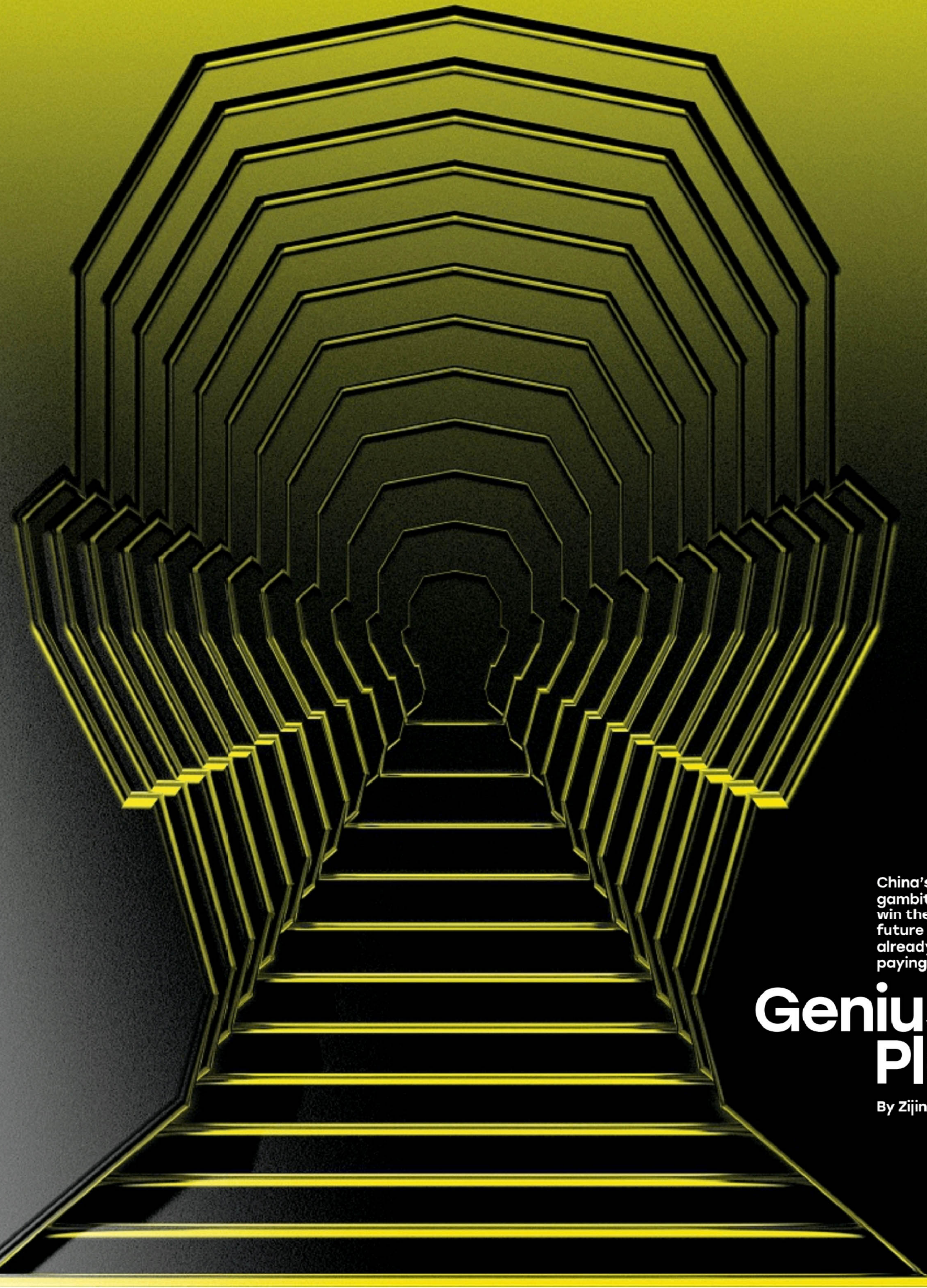
JANUARY 31 2026

FT Weekend Magazine



China's
gambit to
win the
future is
already
paying off

Genius Plan

By Zijing Wu

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FT Weekend Magazine

JANUARY 31 2026

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PAGE 34. ROWLEY LEIGH (LEFT) AT WORK IN THE KITCHEN WITH HIS SON-IN-LAW OLI BROWN

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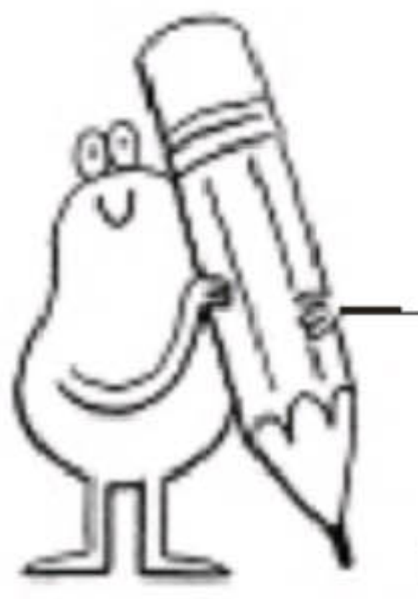

MARGINALIA *by* NADINE REDLICH

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Letters

THE LAST HUMANITARIANS
by Henry Mance

This is important journalism. Shedding light on suffering and hypocrisy (with notable personal risk by the author) is likely to encourage understanding and motivate action. Surely a journalist's highest calling. In our warm homes and comfortable armchairs, we will click on the next article about a new restaurant opening while evil persists.

"If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

THE FLOWERPOT VIA FT.COM

Terrible genocide. Hardly mentioned. No Sudan protest camps at universities. No flags, no demonstrations, no boycotts of the United Arab Emirates. Glad the FT is highlighting it.

WHAT'S WRONG... VIA FT.COM

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND
by Edward White

A brilliant article that makes me long for times past. Shanghai is now sanitised beyond recognition. It's perfectly liveable for middle-aged professionals, but no longer an exciting place for the young.

LETSLISTEN VIA FT.COM

What an amazing article. I was lucky enough to live in Shanghai for about three years from 2010. I was living in the French Concession, and Shelter was an almost weekly ritual. It's still one of the most intimate clubs I've ever been to. I saw some fantastic underground local and international talent there. I miss those days.

DUTCHGREEK78 VIA FT.COM

THE RISE OF ANSWER MACHINES
by Brendan McCord

Brendan McCord's stimulating article on AI reminded me of one of those rare moments in a teaching career when you get just the response you want. It occurred with a group of final-year real-estate students discussing the nature of property. For each definition given, I raised a further question. As the class filed out, one student turned to me and said, "I thought I knew what property was. Now I don't." Perfect!

JOHN KIRKWOOD, SHEFFIELD

Thought provoking. The use of knowledge acquired through reading, observation and one's own analysis of events has enabled us humans to draw conclusions, which have been governed mainly by the environment we live in.

Perception being the first step. Reading Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy*, my perception is that Plato was influenced by the city state of governance, compared with *The City of God* by St Augustine.

Machiavelli was influenced by Florentine Mafia rule, which has a near-modern version with Trump, who thinks might governs all. John Locke was very much into the sanctity of property rights. AI has sped up the learning process with machine technology and is the modern version of the start of the industrial revolution in the 18th century.

We humans are conditioned and channelled by the society we live in, and it will not be unusual to replace traditional universities and teaching staff with "intelligent" machines in the not-too-distant future.

HERMAN ZIEGELAAR, CROYDON

GREENLAND AND OTHER LAND GRABS
by Simon Kuper

Denmark's rebuttal of Donald Trump sadly lacks the wit of the Duke of Westminster's riposte when the US approached him in the 1950s to buy the freehold of its embassy in London's Grosvenor Square.

"All yours," replied the hereditary owner of the most expensive real estate in the country. "But on one condition: you return the land you confiscated from my family at the end of the American War of Independence." The land in question now makes up a large part of Miami. The US settled for a 999-year lease.

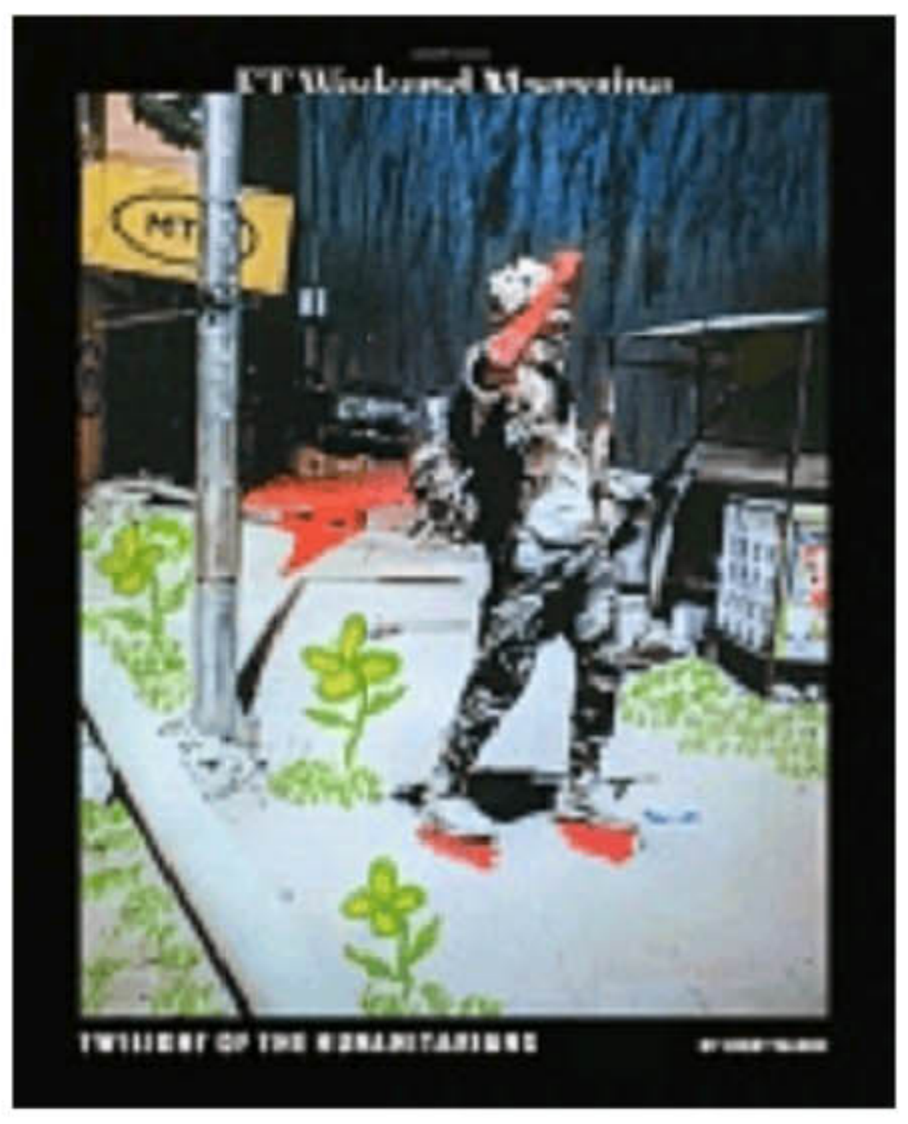
CHARLES MERCEY, SOMERSET

DO I STILL HAVE TO GIVE UP MY SEAT ON TRAINS?
by Robert Shrimsley

Robert Shrimsley is an excellent journalist, but surely, if he thinks wealthy(ish) pensioners should not get free travel ("a ridiculous universal bung") in London, he should set a good example.

As should multimillionaires who complain that they don't pay enough income tax. There's always the option to make voluntary ticket purchases/tax payments.

RUPERT HANCOCK, SOUTH BRENT, DEVON



JANUARY 24
THE LAST HUMANITARIANS

I always enjoy your articles, Robert. I thought I would share a cautionary tale that I spotted in the Evening Standard years ago. I hold it in my heart and say "thank you" liberally when I am offered a seat or, indeed, a hand to carry a small carry-on case up a flight of stairs.

The Scene: A man is seated on an overcrowded Tube train. A woman is strap-hanging, glaring at him. At last, he stands up and offers her his seat.

"And about time too," she says. He promptly sits down again remarking, "So sorry, madam. I thought you were a Lady!" Ouch.

Chivalry is not quite dead, in fact it can appear without warning and take us all by surprise.

SARAH SAUNDERS-DAVIES, HAMPSHIRE

TOUGH TIMES IN BURGUNDY
by Jancis Robinson

In Dublin on Saturday I bought the FT Weekend from a street vendor on O'Connell Street. I read Jancis Robinson's piece on the Burgundian vignerons' difficulties and those in French wine regions. However, I was able to enjoy a large glass of Pinot Noir for €7.

COLIN HEATH, CARDIFF

THE HIGHLAND LADDIE, LEEDS
by Jay Rayner

A review so good, it makes me wish for a Jay Rayner pub guide.

OUTIS VIA FT.COM

Jay Rayner is fast becoming my favourite FT writer along with Edwin Heathcote.

DAVID MUNRO VIA FT.COM

BRIAN GRIGOR'S SCALLOP 'CULLEN SKINK'
by Niki Blasina

Just back from shop. I wish I'd read this article beforehand. I love scallops and what a beautiful photo.

GEEPAP VIA FT.COM

Planning to try this on Sunday. Will let you know how it goes!

SAMJOHNSON VIA FT.COM

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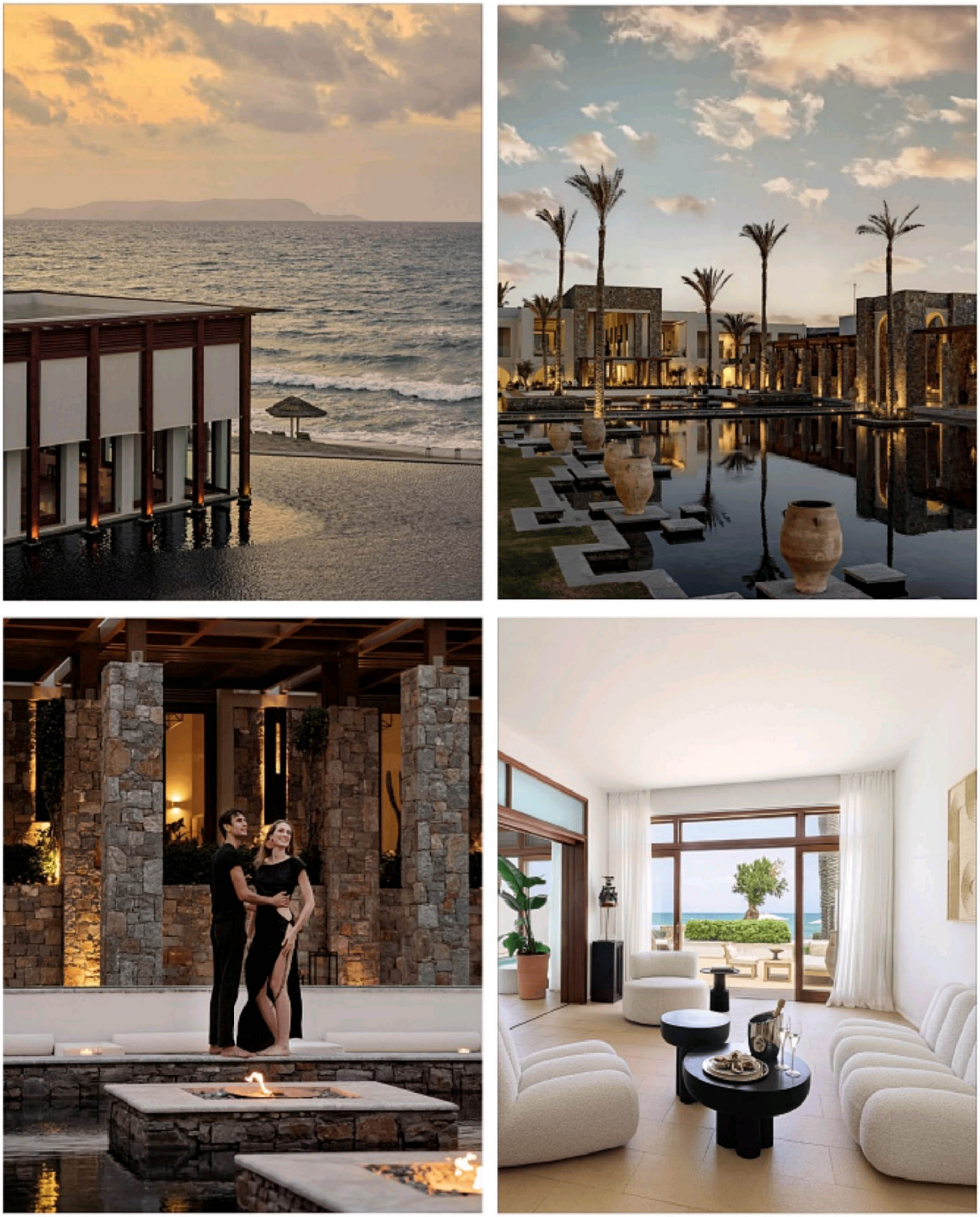
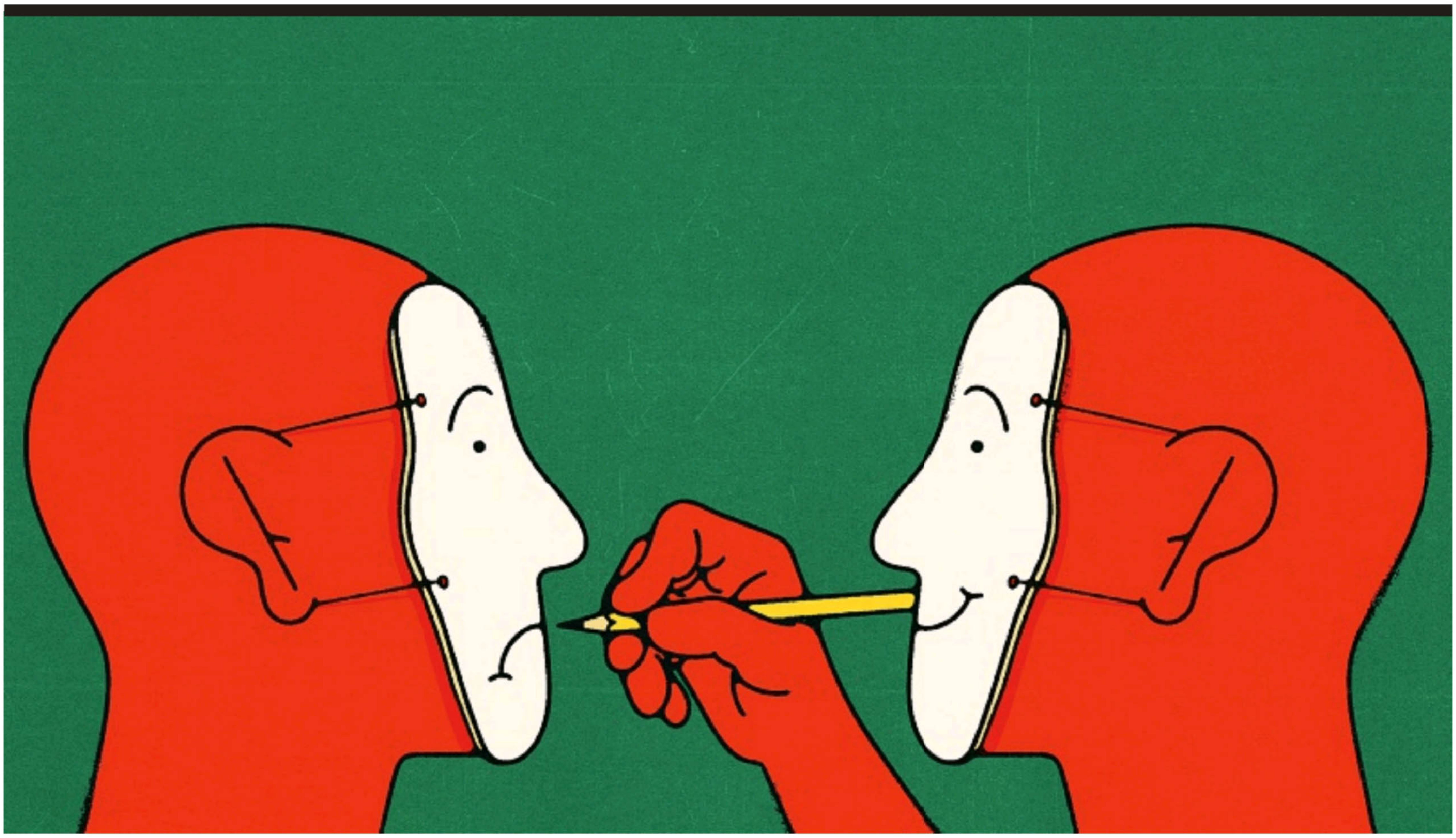


A YEAR ROUND RESORT

amirandes.com

INSIDE Potato-crazy in Berlin **P14**

Intellect



Undercover Economist

Happiness begins (and ends) at home

by TIM HARFORD

ILLUSTRATION *by* ALBERTO MIRANDA

How are you doing? Well, I hope, despite everything. And if you are, then you are just like all the friends and colleagues who sent me messages at Christmas, all of them claiming that they were also doing just fine, also despite everything.

The contradiction here is worth exploring: I'm fine, you're fine, they're fine, but this [pauses to gesture vaguely at the universe] is a disaster. It may be because my friends are all fortunate people, shielded from the miseries of reality, and it may be that they are putting a brave face on their secret suffering. But it may also be that there is a curious mismatch between our contentment with our own lives and our despair about the lives of others.

It would be useful to have more systematic data on this mismatch and a decade ago the pollsters Ipsos MORI gathered some. They asked people across 40 countries how many of their fellow citizens would say they were "rather happy" or "very happy", then compared these guesses with reality as measured by the World Values Survey.

The difference was stark. Most people told Ipsos MORI they were worried about their compatriots' wellbeing, and yet most people who spoke to the World Values Survey were pretty sunny about their own happiness.

In the US, 90 per cent of people said they were "rather happy" or "very happy", but guessed that fewer than half of their compatriots felt the same way. The situation was much the same in the UK. In South Korea, again, 90 per cent of people said they were happy – but this near-universal good cheer didn't stop the Koreans estimating the happiness of other Koreans at 24 per cent.

Canada and Norway were most optimistic in the Ipsos MORI data about the happiness of other people, believing that 60 per cent of their fellow citizens would say they were, at least, "rather happy". But those cheery guesses were not only lower than the reality in Canada and Norway, they were also more pessimistic than the country with the gloomiest actual outlook, which was Hungary, where 69 per cent of people said they are rather or very happy. This gulf between our individual optimism and our gloominess about others is very wide indeed.

> This gulf between our individual optimism and our gloominess about others is very wide indeed

Sadly, Ipsos MORI has not repeated this decade-old exercise but in a recent essay Hannah Ritchie, author of *Not the End of the World*, has assembled numerous instances of this individual contentment contrasting with pessimism about others.

For example, for about a decade of data in the US, the Federal Reserve has asked people about their own finances, their view of the local economy and their view of the national economy. Year after year, people were much more positive about their own finances than about their local economy and much more positive about their local economy than the country as a whole.

INTERNATIONALLY, RESIDENTS IN ALMOST every nation surveyed were more likely to tell pollsters that 2025 was "a bad year for my country" than to say "it was a bad year for me and my family". (The exceptions were Singapore and India.) More than 75 per cent of British people said it was a bad year for Britain but fewer than 45 per cent of Brits reckoned it was a bad year for their own family. Likewise for the future: "58 per cent of Brits are optimistic that 2026 will be a better year for them," explains Ritchie, "but only 32 per cent think that Brits overall will start to feel more optimistic about the country's long-term future." I suppose it is logically possible for Britain to have a bad year even while most Brits have a good one, but it seems more likely that the contradiction reflects some kind of glitch in the way we think.

People focus on different issues when assessing how things are going. In late 2024, 32 per cent of British respondents told pollsters that immigration was one of the most important issues facing the country, but only 4 per cent said it was an important issue for them personally.

It is striking that these gaps are so wide and so consistent across topics. So why do they exist and does it matter? The most plausible explanation is our information diet. We may selectively remember or interpret our own experience, but we are at least starting from a (narrow) ground truth.

Take crime. The Crime Survey of England and Wales shows that crime has been falling for decades. For what it's worth, my own experiences of being a victim of burglary, theft and arson tell the same story – they all took place more than 25 years ago.

Yet somehow when I turn on the evening news, people are still out there doing crimes. The crime rate may be trending downwards but there's always some newsworthy crime somewhere. Social media probably isn't helping, either. Hence the weird discourse on X from people (or bots) who have never been to London about how London is a dystopian hellscape.

Beyond the issue of crime, we inevitably get our information about the nation and the wider world through some kind of media, which will always prioritise the dramatic and the controversial. Information about our own lives is largely unmediated.

There is also the question of control. The economist Johannes Spinnewijn once studied the beliefs and behaviour of job seekers and found that, in general, they were too optimistic about their prospects and too pessimistic about their ability to change those prospects. Seeing the world through "baseline optimism and control pessimism", they expected to find a job quickly, didn't hustle hard enough, and were disappointed. The minority of people who were pessimistic about the situation but optimistic about being able to change it looked harder and found the next job faster. The paranoid survive.

Spinnewijn's distinction between baseline optimism and control optimism is useful. When should we feel most optimistic about being able to influence events? Not when rage-tweeting about an outrage on the other side of the world, but when we are acting close to home. Day-to-day reality offers us a chance to be optimistic both about the baseline and about our opportunity to improve it.

Our digital lives push us in the other direction. The destruction of local news and the rise of social media means that our news consumption is increasingly focused on national and global events – precisely the spheres of life where we are gloomiest. This is corrosive. Spend 16 hours doomscrolling and you may well conclude the end times are here; spend 16 hours living your life and things might not seem so bad. FT

DEPARTMENTS

REPORTS *from* LESSER-KNOWN
FT BUREAUX

STYLE

The equivalent to gold

"By making it difficult to buy the bags, people want them even more," one frustrated shopper observed of fashion house Hermès's marketing strategy. As if to prove it, Dana Auslander, an investment management executive from New York, recently founded the world's first handbag asset fund, dedicated to the brand's Birkin and Kelly bags. "When Donald Trump was elected, I guessed gold was going to do well. I thought that, as an investment, Hermès would be the equivalent to gold," she told The Times.

SOURCE: THE TIMES

ROCK

No difficult second album

By the time the Sex Pistols put out their first album, they were the most notorious band in the UK. The official pop charts wouldn't print the name of the band when their single "God Save the Queen" made it to Number Two in June 1977. The album *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* upended music and reverberates to this day, yet the band's lust for chaos meant that, after quarrelling with manager Malcolm McLaren and his bandmates, singer Johnny Rotten quit a little over two months after the album was released. The band never made another.

SOURCE: ROLLING STONE; VARIOUS

GEOPOLITICS

Anybody out there?

Heard Island and McDonald Islands, which form an external territory of Australia, are accessible only via a two-week boat voyage from Perth on Australia's west coast. They are completely uninhabited, with the last visit from people believed to be nearly 10 years ago. Nevertheless, the islands featured in a list released by the White House of "countries" that would have new trade tariffs imposed. "Nowhere on Earth is safe," said the Australian prime minister, Anthony Albanese.

SOURCE: GUARDIAN

LAST WEEK'S THEME: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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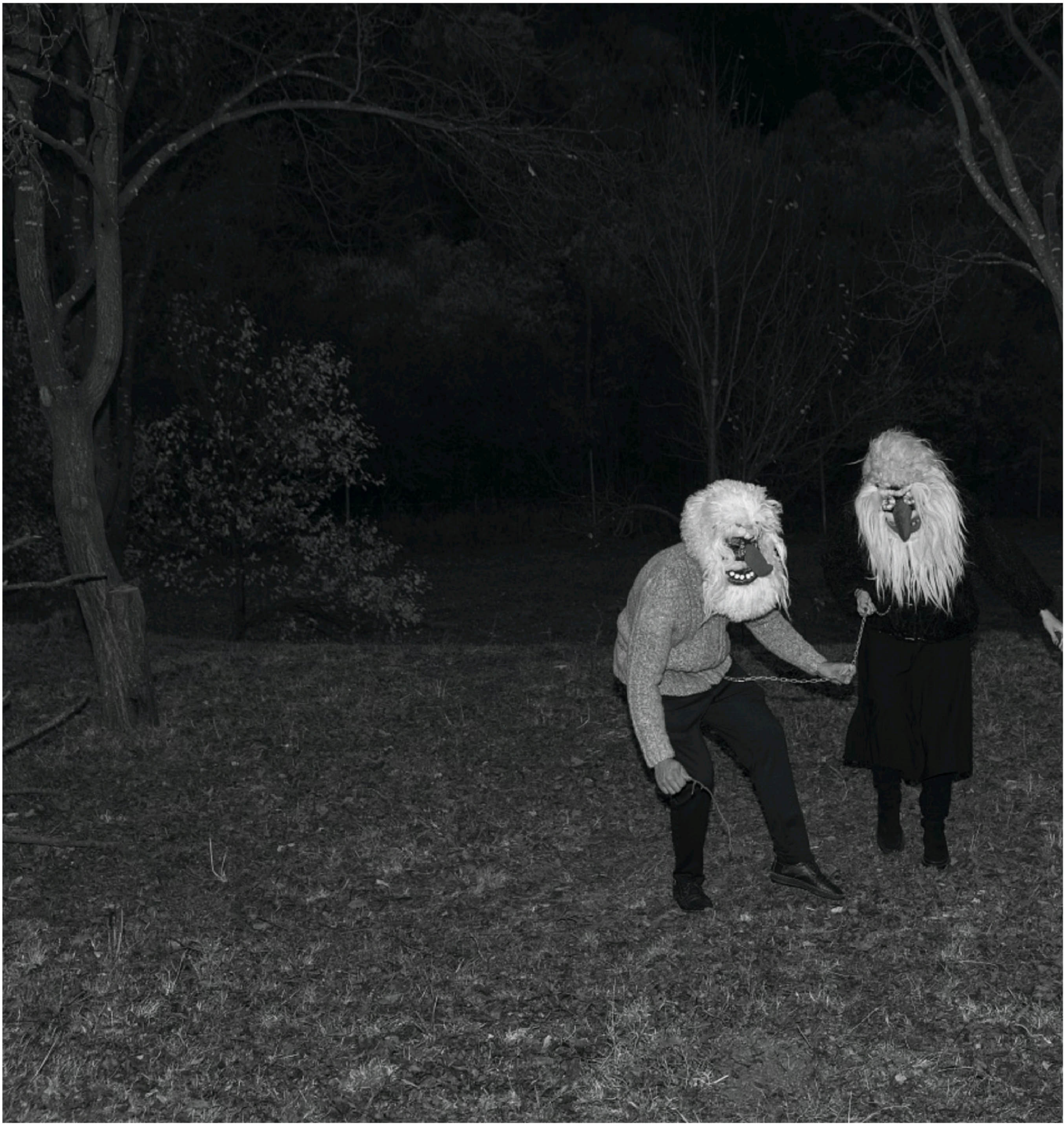

UNTITLED, FROM THE SERIES 'ON HEAVEN'S DOORSILL'

GALLERY

ROXANA SAVIN

by JOSH LUSTIG

Before the Romanian photographer Roxana Savin's grandmother passed away at the age of 95, she had a dream. In the dream, she was approached by her long-dead husband. "Have you come to take me across?" she asked. "Not yet," he replied. "I will be back for you at harvest time." When autumn came, the couple were reunited.

For Savin's grandmother, life and death had long been intertwined. "She began preparing for her own burial as early as her forties," Savin tells me. "In her bedroom, she kept a special cupboard filled with items meant for the funeral, accompanied by meticulous instructions. She had carefully set aside her burial clothes, and she delighted in showing them to me, rearranging them each time I visited."

It was this closeness to her grandmother, who raised Savin in the Romanian countryside until the age of seven, that prompted her project *On Heaven's Doorsill*. The work takes this deeply personal starting point then delves into the mythology, folk stories and pre-Christian traditions of rural Romania, where life is dictated by a connection to nature and the seasons and also the connection between the living and the dead.

During Ceaușescu's reign, all religious and traditional customs were banned. Communism labelled Orthodox practices and pagan traditions as "backwards". But in the countryside, these practices were impossible to stop entirely. "As a child," Savin tells me, "I witnessed rituals like *pomană*, when we had to go to the cemetery with offerings for our ancestors. I have vivid memories of my grandmother going to the village cemetery early in the morning to give alms. It was still dark outside when she would wake up to prepare the baskets of *pomană*. We, the children, were entrusted with carrying them to the cemetery."

The images in *On Heaven's Doorsill* carry with them this dreamlike, hallucinatory quality. Like hazy childhood memories, the black-and-white photographs seem to flicker in the half-light. In this image we see two figures reinterpreting the *chipărușul*, a funeral dance unique to Romania. Traditionally involving 12 men in woollen masks, the ritual involves lighting a fire outside the home of the deceased, whilst the dancers, linked by the "chain of life", dance around it, occasionally jumping through it. "The enduring practice of these traditions acts as a bridge between past and present, life and death," says Savin, "enforcing a sense of community that anchors its people in something far older and larger than themselves." FT

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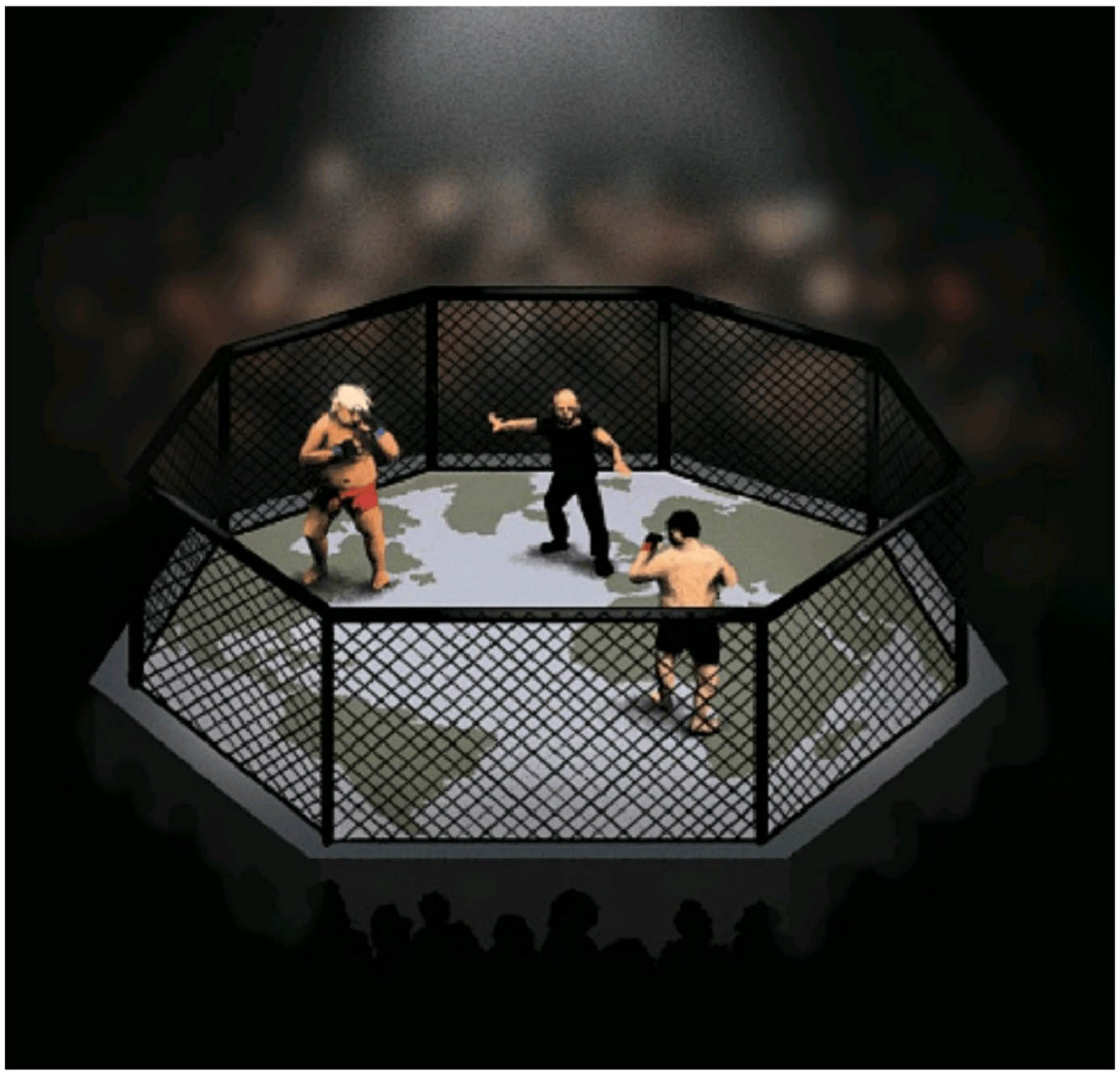
"On Heaven's Doorsill" is published by dienacht, dienacht-magazine.com/publishing

World View

New world disorder

by SIMON KUPER

ILLUSTRATION *by* HARRY HAYSOM



There are moments when a new world order arrives. It happened after European wars ended in 1648, 1815 and 1945, and after the USSR collapsed in 1991. Donald Trump's warmongering last week over Greenland clarified that we are living through some version of that again.

"The old order is not coming back," said Canada's prime minister Mark Carney in his epoch-defining speech in Davos. Any politician still invoking "the international community" or calling the US an "ally" is either a liar or hasn't been paying attention. But what are the rules of the new order? Amid the daily barrage of absurd events, it can be hard to perceive any structure.

Well, rule one is that there aren't any rules any more. The new order is like an Ultimate Fighting Championship for states. They can do what they want: invade other states, commit war crimes or genocide, acquire nukes. (In fact, even businesses can presumably do that, now that the US lets nuclear energy companies access weapons-grade plutonium.) AI is being developed with no regulation, because what could go wrong?

Rule two: international organisations have become zombies. Carney said the World Trade Organization, UN and COP were "under threat", which is putting it mildly. But he might have added Nato, the International Criminal Court and any other body that aspires to tell countries what to do. Nobody can enforce international law. Weirdly, the only multilateral organisation that is getting stronger is the one whose demise was always being predicted: the EU.

The new world order is dominated by three major powers and a hyperactive troll, Russia. The US and China usually act solo without allies, now that the Americans have burned most of theirs. The third power is the last meaningful multinational alliance: a "Little West" consisting of Europe, including Brexit Britain but minus Hungary, plus Canada.

The Little West is a herbivorous but surprisingly solid bloc, terrified into co-operation by outside threats. Even France's likely new far-right leader, Jordan Bardella, is becoming a European, saying during the Greenland scare: "Facing Trump's blackmail, we either react with the necessary firmness, or we disappear behind the logic of empire." Almost all other countries on earth are non-aligned, hoping to play off the big powers against each other.

The Little West has an ideology of sorts, probably shared by a slight majority of its citizens: democracy, individual freedoms and nostalgia for the old order. The other powers have no belief system beyond an all-purpose aggressive nationalism. China's Communist party isn't communist, and Russian and American action bounces around according to the personal whims of Vladimir Putin and Trump. No interest group inside either country's elite wanted to invade Ukraine, annex Greenland or take Venezuela's oil until the leader got the notion into his head.

> States can do what they want: commit war crimes or genocide, acquire nukes

This eccentricity feeds another characteristic of the new order: total unpredictability. Anything can happen. Anyone can be invaded next, not just Taiwan. Partly because states now attack each other with impunity, decades-old regimes can suddenly crumble: Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and possibly Iran's theocracy.

In the new order, the biggest problem is ignored: climate change. Leaders and peoples have tacitly decided not to solve it through international agreement or personal sacrifice, though there's still the faint possibility of it being solved by cheap Chinese tech.

Globalisation survives in the new order, even if hardly anyone speaks up for it. Globalisation of goods – measured by trade as a percentage of GDP – has stagnated just below record highs. But the globalisation of people continues: there's record migration, record air travel, the relentless spread of the first global language since the Tower of Babel and a globalisation of minds, driven by social media. People everywhere obsess over Trump, Taylor Swift and Manchester United.

That brings us to the new world's inhabitants. They increasingly live alone, unmarried, childless and on screens. They are ceasing to read and have begun outsourcing their thinking to AI. With few traditional institutions left to shape their minds, they assemble what beliefs they have online.

The new world order may not last long. It isn't built on long-term institutions, and the three rulers who have changed the behaviour of the US, China and Russia are septuagenarians. When this order ends, there's a risk it might go out with a bang. FT

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Dispatch

'Oh good, the potatoes are here'

Why the Germans are handing out free spuds

By *Ruth Weissmann*

They say there's no such thing as a free lunch. But for one cold January week in Berlin, there has been. As long as you're willing to eat nothing but potatoes.

"We heard about it in a group chat this morning. 'Big news'," says Kirsten Schmid, who has loaded an armful of spuds into a blue Ikea tote. Schmid and her boyfriend, Kevin Chow, are standing next to a white polypropylene bag stuffed with unwashed potatoes, although "bag" seems a funny word for something that comes up to their shoulders. The text chain alerted them to a "literal tonne of potatoes" available for the taking, Chow says, and they came right away.

The free rations are sitting on the eastern edge of Berlin's Tempelhofer Feld, a sprawling former airfield whose decommissioned runways have become a public park. The Feld, as it's known locally, was once the main stage for the Berlin Airlift, the 15-month operation to get food and supplies to blockaded West Berliners during the cold war. The potatoes delivered this morning, however, are part of an entirely different rescue mission, one undertaken on behalf of the spuds themselves.

Chow, who has brought his GoPro, nods towards two older German women digging around the other end of the bag, one of them piling potatoes into a shopping trolley while using her free hand to smoke a cigarette. The woman has just rattled off the many forms of tuber transfiguration she's planning for her haul. Potato dumplings, soup, salad; stuffed potato croquettes; boiled potatoes with Quark (a German cream cheese); potatoes hashed and fried. Chow approves the list. He asks me if I've seen the scene in *Forrest Gump* where Gump's friend Bubba lists 21 different ways to prepare shrimp.

Then he and Schmid step a few metres to the side, and begin filming. "Over there, just a bunch of DJs getting free potatoes..." Chow says to camera.

Word of mouth is a powerful advert and, within minutes, the potatoes have drawn a small crowd. There's a young actor and his wife, pregnant with their fourth boy, taking supplies for their extended family. One man, who lives just down the block, has doubled back after dropping his daughter off at day care. "Potatoes are probably the best thing to get people going," he says. He's loaded up his bicycle with about 100 of them. "Cabbage is cabbage. There is a limit to what you can do with cabbages. But potatoes, you can do everything."

By midday, the potatoes, about 5,000, are gone. Latecomers, their reusable totes drooping, will be dejected to find only dirt at the bottom of the industrial-sized sack. The irony is that there are millions more, but the majority are trapped in warehouses across Germany, unavailable and, at least according to the market, unwanted.

BY NOVEMBER, IT WAS CLEAR THAT EUROPE HAD a potato problem. Thanks to the right combination of rain and sunshine through the summer, farmers across Germany experienced a bumper harvest. According to the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture, the national yield totalled 13.4 million tonnes – more than two million tonnes above the average, and the highest harvest in 25 years.

The glut far exceeded the sector's processing capacity, leaving the potatoes piling up in storage and farmers desperate to unload the spuds as prices collapsed. Despite being perfectly edible, much of it has ended up in biogas plants or used as animal feed. A farmer who sent 400 tonnes of his potatoes to be incinerated told the German tabloid Bild: "It breaks my heart. We grow food – and in the end, we destroy it."

Gluts like the current "potato flood", as some industry websites have called it, aren't uncommon in agriculture. Last year Germany had too many hops; this year, market watchers are warning of a "milk tsunami". But the current predicament was "the perfect storm," says Niels van der Boom, a potato industry analyst for DCA Market Intelligence. On top of the stellar weather, farmers in Germany, Belgium, France and the Netherlands had collectively bet big on the potato in 2025, planting some 40,000 hectares more than the previous year. They were encouraged by traders who ignored the fact that demand for deep-fried chips and crisps, which has been booming for years, was starting to flatten in Europe, van der Boom explains. "The competition was looking at each other and didn't want to be the first one that would set back the contract prices," he explains. Add in rising production from Chinese, Indian and Canadian farmers, and such a glut has almost nowhere to go.

While the crisis stretches across Europe, it's particularly painful in Germany, a nation famed for its love of a good spud. So baked, boiled and mashed into the national morale is the nutrient-dense superfood that it feels counterintuitive that Germany would be forced to waste so many. Surely there could be some kind of intervention.

In December, just two days before Christmas one arrived. Wolfgang Oels, COO of the Berlin-based eco-friendly search engine Ecosia, sent a cold email to Peter Schink, the editor-in-chief of local newspaper Berliner Morgenpost. Oels was in contact with a farm near Leipzig that was sitting on 4,000 tonnes (4 million kg) of surplus spuds – enough for a bagful for each of the capital city's 3.8 million residents. He proposed a joint rescue mission: Ecosia would finance the transport of the potatoes if Morgenpost would spread the word.

The plan was announced on January 10, along with a website where local organisations could apply to be one of the drop-off points. By January 12, they'd received more than 1,300 requests.

In the end, 174 locations were selected to receive one tonne of potatoes each in staggered deliveries throughout the following week. The first truckload, 22 tonnes, went to Berlin's food bank. Many of the rest went to schools, churches and non-profits. But there was also a butcher shop, an ice-skating rink, a boat engine service centre, a co-working space, a district office for Germany's leftwing Die Linke political party and one of Berlin's zoos. A downtown flower shop was signed up by an employee doing a photography series on the potato. Schokoladen, a former anarchist squat that is now a punkish indie music venue, advertised their potatoes with a handwritten sign on their graffitied door. Neighbours waited for updates from their nearest potato hotspot via Instagram. "The whole of Berlin was potato hype," says Katja Scheel, who registered the housing co-op she lives in as a potato drop site.

Not everyone has been as enthusiastic about the giveaway. Farmers from the surrounding countryside complained the stunt would undermine the local market. The regional farmers' association derided it as "4,000 tonnes of contempt for food, 4,000 tonnes of predatory capitalism" and estimated the market value of the free potatoes at €300,000 or more.

Just before the trucks started rolling, the group pleaded with Berliners to avoid participating in what could further drive down prices for reeling potato growers. Instead, local farmer Timo Scheib

BERLINERS ANSWER THE CALL TO BOIL, BAKE AND MASH

offered a different course of action. "Simply don't pick them up."

"OH GOOD, THE POTATOES ARE HERE." BRIAN LI, who moved to Berlin from Washington DC a month ago for a historical research fellowship, walks up outside Restaurant Keyser Soze, a drop-off site in the Mitte district. A one-tonne bag, too heavy to lift without machinery, has just been set down on the sidewalk. "So this is what 1,000 kilos of potatoes looks like," says Li.

It's the fourth day of the giveaway, and spuds are still being deployed across Berlin. The owner of Keyser Soze, who says they serve traditional German food to "the usual suspects", hovers nearby, collecting funny-looking potatoes as mementos. "That one is a heart! Put it on the table," she instructs. She flags down a cab driver, who eyes the gargantuan pile of tubers on the sidewalk. "*Das ist Deutschland*," he announces, grinning. He stashes a handful in his boot.

> 'There is a limit to what you can do with cabbages,' said one man. 'But potatoes, you can do everything'

Marie Lehmann, who works down the street, is more conflicted as she fills her cloth tote. "I usually buy local, organic potatoes," she says. "I'm not going to buy any more potatoes this week. So how is my local supermarket doing?"

Ecosia, which uses its profits to plant trees, publicly pitched the operation to Berliners as a climate action; the project's website claims that if people ate 4,000 tonnes of potatoes for protein instead of the equivalent volume of chicken, it would save 250,000 trees' worth of space in the Brazilian rainforest. Most of the people I encounter are at least as concerned with their wallets as the environment – even though the supermarket prices for potatoes are as low as €1.49 a bag.

RUTH WEISSMANN

Manuela Verduci, an Italian native who's now a social worker in Berlin, is an exception. "I'm vegan, so this is one of the things I can eat without regret," she says, loading up on spuds over at Schokoladen, where they've been dragged into the courtyard and situated underneath a disco ball. She's amused by the whole thing. "The universe is making fun of the Germans," Verduci jokes, then hesitates, afraid to bite the proverbial potato that feeds her. "Germans are actually very good with social distribution."

This may be true, but my own effort to chase the potatoes around the city (a grub crawl, if you will) has a success rate of about 50 per cent. On Wednesday, I barely catch a delivery at the clubhouse of FC Internationale, an all-ages anti-racist football club in the southwestern corner of Berlin. The truck has just pulled up, and already there's a line of about 30 Berliners armed with various sacks.

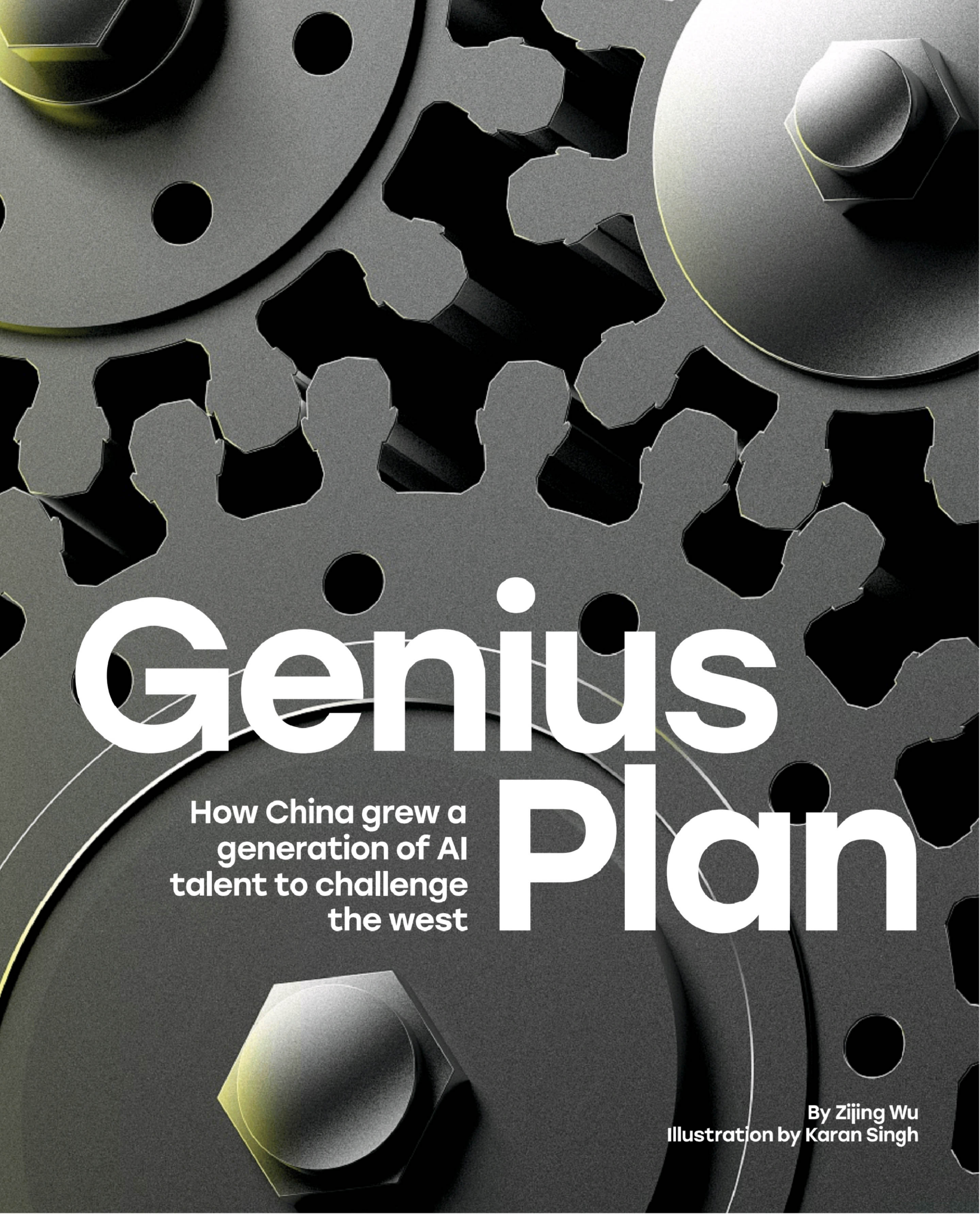
"I told my work that I needed a one-hour break, and they asked why. And I was like 'I am receiving a tonne of potatoes,'" says Joshua Senne, 31, a striker for the club who helped organise the delivery. "They were like, 'this is the most German thing ever, you need an hour break because you're getting 1,000 kilos of potatoes?'" In the end, he doesn't need the full hour; the potatoes are gone in under 25 minutes.

By this point in the week, it's clear that the initiative has run into some logistical issues. Deliveries have been delayed at some locations; at others, the potatoes arrive earlier than expected. At a fried chicken shop called Birds in the Kitchen, the pallet mover isn't powerful enough to get the heap of potatoes inside, and the truck hauls them away again. The owner, who hails from the same region as the orphaned potatoes, is frustrated. People keep coming in, asking where the potatoes are. "Do you have a good number for Morgenpost?" he asks me when I stop by.

In the end, the potato campaign may have bitten off more than it can chew. Only about 200 tonnes – 5 per cent of the planned 4,000 tonnes – have been delivered to Berlin as of January 27. A few additional tonnes are dropped at food banks in Saxony, and two trucks have been sent to Ukraine. The campaign is hoping to arrange more deliveries in the coming weeks, but it's not clear how much longer the project will continue. A request for comment to Morgenpost went unanswered, while Ecosia's spokesperson promised a statement, although "Wolfgang is at Davos". When it arrived, there was no definitive answer to where or when the giveaway would end.

Following the potato trail is an exercise in contradictions. A mass giveaway of a widely popular food is a well-intentioned, some might say altruistic, thing to do. But the local farmers felt like someone had come along and shaken their economic tightrope. Was this an act of kindness, or disregard? Everywhere I went, strangers wanted to talk to each other about potato recipes, help each other carry things, hold back the edges of the industrial bag so the biggest, roundest ones could be gleaned. But most people were also filling up multiple rucksacks, buckets, even shopping carts. Was this generosity, or selfishness? Abundance, or scarcity?

Near the end of the week, I spy Juliette Marchewka, a 39-year-old psychotherapist, at her second potato drop. "The first bag was gone in a day, distributed to my patients, so I came back," she says. They see it as a sign of kindness in a world that needs it. And as far as that goes, "There's no such thing as too many potatoes in Germany. Definitely not." FT



Genius Plan

How China grew a generation of AI talent to challenge the west

By Zijing Wu

Illustration by Karan Singh

About three years ago, Stacey Tang, a manager in a pharmaceuticals company in Beijing, received a peculiar phone call. A voice speaking from an unknown landline number instructed her to send her 15-year-old son to take a qualification test for the "genius class" at one of the city's elite high schools.

It was November 2022, at the peak of Beijing's Covid-19 lockdowns. Schools were mostly closed and any in-person contact was discouraged. Even so, the test setting sounded bizarre: a moving van that would drive the boy through the streets of the capital for an hour while he tackled college-level maths problems.

Some parents might have baulked at the idea, but not Tang. "In any other country, you would immediately suspect an abduction plot or simple lunacy," she said, grinning at me through the steam from her Starbucks latte. "Instead, I was weeping with joy, and sent my boy right away. I understood this for what it was: his golden ticket to the best educational resources in China."

Tang's son was one of an estimated 100,000 talented Chinese teenagers selected every year to enter a network of science-focused talent streams run across the country's top high schools. The genius classes, also called "experiment" or "competition" classes, coach gifted students to compete in international competitions in maths, physics, chemistry, biology and computer science. Tang was on the genius path herself almost 30 years ago, in her home city of Chengdu in south-western China. It helped her move to Beijing to study at the prestigious Peking University, and secure a well-paid job.

For decades, genius classes have been turning out the leading lights of China's science and technology sectors. It is hard to overstate how essential they have been to the development of the companies now challenging US tech dominance, especially in AI, robotics and advanced manufacturing.

Genius-class graduates include the founder of TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, and the core developers behind its powerful content recommendation algorithm. Both leaders of China's two biggest e-commerce platforms, Taobao and PDD, came from the genius stream, as did the billionaire who started the food delivery "super-app" Meituan. The two brothers behind the chipmaker Cambricon, now one of the leading Chinese rivals to Nvidia, were in genius classes. So were the core engineers behind leading large language models at DeepSeek and Alibaba's Qwen, not to mention Tencent's celebrated new chief scientist, poached from OpenAI late last year. The list goes on.

China's genius classes differ in important ways from talent streams in the west. First, the system dwarfs its international competitors in scale. Second, it is state-driven. China graduates around five million majors in science, technology, engineering and maths every year, according to the state media Xinhua, compared with about half a million in the US.

Tens of thousands of these graduates are genius-class students, taken out of regular classes for an intense period of study between the ages of 16-18. While others swot for China's feared college admissions exams, the *gaokao,* those on the genius path have the chance to bypass that fate altogether, bagging places at top universities before they are out of high school, depending on their results in starry international competitions. The best students continue to more advanced talent schemes at the top Chinese universities, such as the elite computer science programmes at Tsinghua and Shanghai Jiao Tong universities.

When Jensen Huang, Nvidia's Taiwanese-American CEO, called Chinese AI researchers "world-class" last year, he was likely thinking of the genius-class grads who are building the country's tech powerhouses such as DeepSeek and Huawei, as well as AI companies internationally. "You walk up and down the aisles of Anthropic or OpenAI or [Google] DeepMind," said Huang last May, "there's a whole bunch of AI researchers there, and they are from China... They are extraordinary and so the fact that they do extraordinary work is not surprising to me."

A year ago, when the Chinese AI start-up DeepSeek shocked the world with the launch of its high-performing large language model, R1, at a fraction of the cost of its international rivals, many western observers wondered how a small team of Chinese researchers could be in a position to challenge American AI supremacy. The genius class is a big part of the answer.

WHEN WANG ZIHAN STARTED HIS INTERNship at DeepSeek in 2024, at the age of 21, he had no idea he was joining a team that would soon rattle America's dominance in AI.

The prevailing narrative in Silicon Valley – and Washington DC – at the time was that US export controls were successfully bottlenecking Chinese progress in AI, which was trailing American efforts by one to two years. AI companies in China were understood to be merely copying the models released by OpenAI and Meta.

Wang worked on DeepSeek's V2 model, a predecessor of the foundation for the R1 model that would, a few months later, propel the company into the headlines in a Sputnik moment. DeepSeek had beaten many of its US rivals, producing a world-class reasoning model using significantly fewer advanced chips than those of its international peers. While OpenAI's models remained closed, DeepSeek made its entire development process public and R1 was open for anyone to download.

Unlike many established Chinese tech start-ups, DeepSeek's team was almost entirely homegrown. Its reclusive founder, Liang Wenfeng, was especially proud about his domestic talent pool. "We want to grow our own top talents, otherwise China will always be a follower," he said in 2024, in a rare interview with Chinese media.

Working at DeepSeek was a thrilling time for Wang. "No KPI [key performance indicators], no hierarchy, no one at your back, and endless resources for you to experiment new ideas," he told me over a video call. He was part of a team of more than 100, almost all of whom came from genius classes across China. "My education background was one of the least shiny of them all. I was lucky with my timing." His teammates came mostly from China's top two colleges, Tsinghua and Peking Universities, as well as Zhejiang University, Liang's own alma mater. Almost everyone was a seasoned participant and medal winner in at least one of the big international science competitions.

Wang had entered the genius class at a top-ranking high school in Wuhan, the No.1 Middle School Affiliated to Central China Normal University. In Wuhan, one of the most densely populated cities in central China, competition for school and college places is among the fiercest in the country. "The education I had growing up was extremely hard, but pressure and cut-throat competition makes one learn the best," he said. "You feel like, after that, there's no challenge in the world I can't take on."

Unlike many of his classmates, Wang, who liked history and represented his high school in the mock UN debates in Beijing, was not laser-focused on science. He thinks his interest in humanities may have been helpful in his later AI work. One of DeepSeek's secrets, allowing it to excel in areas such as fengshui, commonly used in Chinese fortune telling, has been to use human experts called *Baixiaosheng* (Chinese for "know-it-all") to train the model for the sorts of knowledge, mostly humanities-related, that would otherwise be difficult to attain from browsing publicly available data. Though DeepSeek has never acknowledged it openly, some have speculated that this feature might be why its model performs significantly better in those areas than competitors.

Wang left DeepSeek last year to pursue a PhD at Northwestern University in the US. He told me he wanted to see the world and experience different cultures. He is not sure yet whether he will stay or return home after finishing his studies. He knows a few Chinese PhDs who have had their US visa applications rejected. "More Chinese students, who make up about half of science major PhDs here, are considering going back now because of the uncertainty. If you have to live with the risk of getting kicked out any day, it's too much pressure," he said.

"Plus, China is doing really well."

'We want to grow our own top talents, otherwise China will always be a follower'

Liang Wenfeng
DeepSeek founder

CHINA'S TOP-DOWN EMPHASIS ON SCIENCE EDUCATION can be traced back to the years after the second world war. In 1958, Chairman Mao launched his Great Leap Forward campaign, aiming to rival western superpowers in military might and heavy industry. The plan had disastrous results including mass starvation and millions of deaths. But over the decades that followed, the message that science was the key to national progress continued to echo through classrooms and homes.

To a society that had for centuries prioritised the humanities over technical or scientific training, the shift had profound implications. A blunt slogan on the wall of many local education bureaus by the 1980s read: "Produce talent quick and early." A nine-year compulsory and almost free schooling plan was implemented to elevate the education level of the population. Meanwhile, in a handful of top schools across the country, the genius classes emerged to groom the most promising young minds and to see whether Chinese talents could beat their rivals on the world stage.

The International Science Olympiads are a series of annual competitions for high-school students, each run by its own organising body and hosted by a different nation every year. Participating countries send a team of their best students after running national selection exams, hoping to win gold. The maths Olympiad was introduced first, in 1959. Other competitions in physics, chemistry, computer science, biology and more were added later.

In 1985, two Chinese students were the first to participate in the International Mathematical Olympiad held in Joutsa, Finland. They brought back one bronze medal between them. It was a milestone, demonstrating that Chinese students were capable of competing alongside the Russians and Americans who dominated the podiums. The following year, China sent a full team of six students to the Olympiad in Warsaw. They returned with three bronze medals, a haul that won them national fame. A handful of top high schools were encouraged enough to allocate special resources, extremely scarce at the time, to create classes tailored to the super talented, specifically to groom them to compete in Olympiads and bring back medals for China. A similar strategy was implemented to find and train top athletes.

The classes quickly became a standard feature for thousands of schools – and the results were impressive. As the years passed, Chinese teams started to sweep most of the gold medals at Olympiads, far exceeding their rivals. In 2025, the Chinese national teams sent a total of 23 contestants to the Olympiads: 22 came home with gold medals.

‘The education I had growing up was extremely hard. You feel like, after that, there’s no challenge in the world I can’t take on’

Wang Zihan
genius-class graduate

Starting in the 2000s, university admissions were reformed, giving more flexibility to colleges to allocate places without relying solely on the results of the *gaokao*. National competitions were set up for students at the end of their sophomore year of high school. Those who won top prizes in the national exam could receive direct admission to one of the 985 Project universities, China’s 39-member Ivy League equivalent.

The chance to skip the *gaokao* was a strong incentive for students to participate in the genius stream. The traditional pathway for high-school students in China is three years of study in the *gaokao*’s mandatory subjects of Chinese, English and Maths, as well as three more chosen subjects from physics, chemistry, biology, history, geography and politics. Exams in all six subjects are taken at the end of the third year. Genius-class students, on the other hand, focus on their “competition subjects”. A student competing in the International Physics Olympiad, for example, needs to not only finish three years of high-school physics but also at least half of the college-level syllabus, in order to be competitive enough to take the national exam. The very dedicated might not study much else at all.

As the number of students on the genius path grew, parents began to complain. It was not possible for everyone in a genius class to qualify for direct college admission - only about 3 per cent make it each year. The rest are sent back to the *gaokao* route - with only a year of high school left to prepare for the daunting exams. In response to the complaints, many classes modified their curricula to provide a more well-rounded education, dedicating more time to English and Chinese literature. At the end of 2025, China’s education bureau tightened its policy, allowing only the top 10 per cent of the national competition prize winners to qualify for direct admission to Tsinghua and Peking Universities.

New academic focuses have also emerged. There has been an increasing interest in computer science and technology, spurred by the exponential growth of the industry. The informatics Olympiad has overtaken maths and physics to become the most popular. And the rise of AI has put this shift into warp-speed. As early as 2017, China outlined the development of AI as a “key national growth strategy”, with talent building identified as one of the most important priorities. In the following year alone, 35 new special classes with the keyword “AI” in their names were founded at high schools and universities.

ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT COLLEGE-LEVEL GENIUS programmes in China is Tsinghua University’s Special Pilot Class for Computer Science. It is better known as “Yao Class”, after the famed Chinese computer scientist Andrew Yao who teaches it. Yao, who trained at Harvard and taught at Princeton, is famous for his pioneering work in the fields of quantum computing and cryptography. He is the sole Chinese winner of the Turing Award, sometimes called the Nobel Prize of computer science.

Given that, Yao’s position in American academia seemed well-entrenched. Yet, in 2004, he left his tenured teaching job at Princeton to found a computer science undergraduate programme at Beijing’s Tsinghua University. It was a symbolic move seen as evidence of the shifting power dynamics in the tech race between the US and China. Yao’s ambition was simple: to establish a talent-training hub in China on an equal footing to those at MIT and Stanford. Less than a decade later, by 2018, he was telling an interviewer, “My goal has been achieved… I think our students are actually better now [than those from the top US schools].”

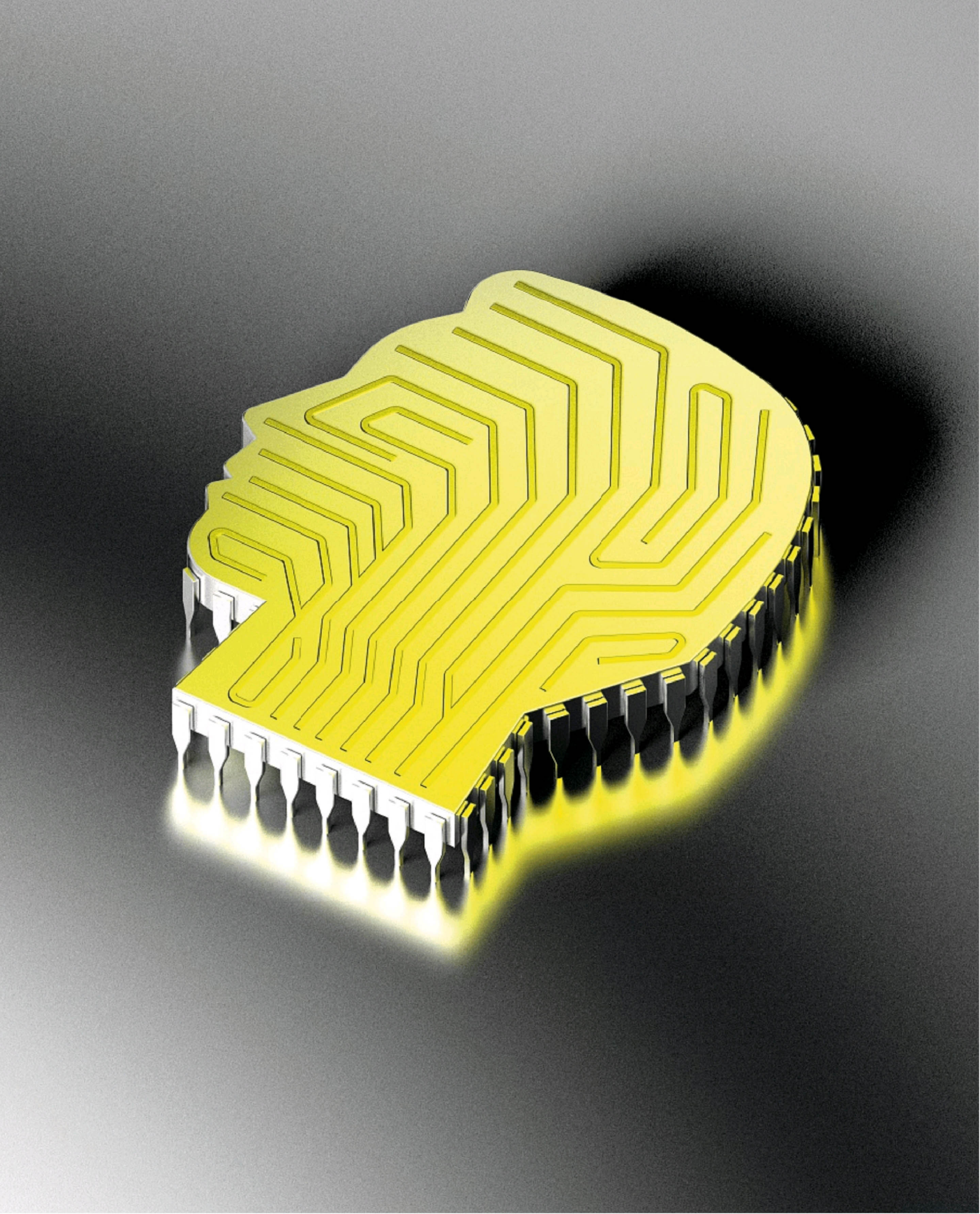
One of the first students to be selected for the Yao Class was Lou Tiancheng, the co-founder and CTO of Pony.ai, a robotaxi start-up worth $6.9bn after its IPO last year. Lou was a genius-class champion. He won a gold medal in the informatics Olympiad at high school. Armed with that prize, he had his pick of every top university and programme. It wasn’t a difficult choice, he told me last September: “I had no hesitation, because of Professor Yao… I wanted to learn from the best and with the best.”

Yao Class starts with about 30 students per year, each of them the best of the best from competitions and *gaokao*. Its 2019 cohort of 27 students, for example, consisted of 24 students with gold medals and three *gaokao* number ones in their provinces, according to a school report.

Lou thrived at Tsinghua, continuing to participate in the world’s biggest computer science competitions. After winning two consecutive championships at Google Code Jam and other big prizes, he became known as China’s top coder. Now 40, he still joins coding competitions every year, despite his busy schedule managing one of China’s leading autonomous driving companies. “It’s like an annual polishing so I don’t get rusty,” he said.

Lou credits the genius-class system with encouraging the kind of self-learning that helps students tackle the toughest problems, some of which even their teachers can’t solve, rather than rely on the rote learning required by the *gaokao*. What he learnt also contributed to the most strategic overhaul at Pony.ai in 2020, he said. His start-up was reaching a plateau when he realised they needed to shift from the original model of humans teaching robotaxis what to do, to a new one in which humans would define the goals for the robotaxis and then let them learn by themselves.

It was a difficult decision, one that meant spending years building an autonomous driving-world model for the computer to learn in by itself. But Lou thinks it paid off, and that it might even signal a path towards the destination of artificial general intelligence (AGI) – a highly autonomous system that would outperform humans at various



> **‘I’ve witnessed first hand how China has grown from having zero AI talent 20 years ago to mass producing them’**
>
> **Dai Wenyuan genius-class graduate**

tasks. “We were, and still are, determined that this is the right path to ultimate intelligence in autonomous driving,” Lou told me. “I don’t think AGI will emerge the way many people expected it to, in the way of general intelligence such as LLM. But, in sector after sector, AI will reach the level of human intelligence and better, if trained properly. Autonomous driving should be one of the first to get there. It could happen within five years.”

Meanwhile, Lou is implementing this guided self-learning theory in the education of his own daughter, who is still in primary school. “We set goals for her and teach her the basic disciplines. The rest she has all the freedom to explore.”

OF COURSE, OUT OF THE MILLIONS OF STUDENTS WHO have trained hard in genius classes over the years, there are bound to be some failures and outliers. I was one.

As a teenager, my high scores in maths propelled me into the genius class at my high school, one of the best in the eastern city of Hangzhou. Despite my interest in reading and writing fiction, the weight of expectation from teachers and parents was simply too strong to resist. I remember an official from the district education bureau imploring me: “You have a chance to win a medal in science, and you want to waste it on writing about imaginary characters?” He had been invited by my headmaster to persuade me and another stubborn student to join the talent stream. Of course, we did.

My first year of high school was miserable. While we shared English and Chinese teachers with the regular classes, we in the genius class had our own dedicated teachers in maths, physics, chemistry and biology. Each student was expected to choose maths and at least one more subject as their major, and then take extra classes dedicated to competition training. I chose chemistry as the seemingly least boring option, and embarked on two years of intense training, during which we had to finish the three-year high school curriculum and about half of college-level chemistry and maths, before sitting the national competition at the end of the second year.

To make time for such a workload, our class simply gave up on history, geography and politics. There was a debate about whether to keep PE. The school eventually decided in favour, reasoning that students would need to maintain good health in order to sustain such intensive study. I read my fiction in secret on the side, tearing up novels into 100-page booklets and hiding them in my brick-thick textbooks. As a result my scores were not great, and I was generally seen as hopeless at winning prizes and bringing honour to our school.

One day, something dawned on me during a talk given by a medal-winning alumnus. If I ranked highly enough to qualify for a direct college admission, I could enjoy the entire third year of high school in total freedom. No more school, homework or mock tests. If I didn’t, the third year preparing for *gaokao* would be even worse than my first.

Newly incentivised, I began to study chemistry seriously and, surprisingly, I found it enjoyable. The immersive learning environment created a vacuum of sorts, blocking out the distractions. Succeeding in solving a difficult problem felt precious. My classmates were stimulating, pushing me to want to learn more. I was among eight students from my class to win a prize and qualify for direct college admission. My final score was just one point above the cut off. I had dodged the ferocious *gaokao*.

A year of relative freedom did indeed follow. While everyone else studied day and night, the students who had already secured university places were assigned by the school to clean staircases among other odd jobs. But some of us started to sneak out, cycling for an hour to visit the best noodle shop and going to the movies, trying to make up for two lost years buried under books.

The time came to choose a college and a major. I was torn between chemistry at Peking University and journalism at Fudan University, both the best in China, but completely different paths. Then came the test to choose a national team for the chemistry Olympiad. My score was 23 out of 100. All the chosen candidates got full marks. I felt hopeless. In the end, I was the only one from my class to pick a non-science college major. Out of the 50 students in my batch, about one-third now hold senior positions at tech-related companies in China and the US. The others generally fared well too, scattered throughout finance, healthcare and academia.

China’s genius plan is certainly paying off on the national level. On an individual level, though, I question whether the programme was really worth it for all of us who have participated, willingly or unwillingly, in the past decades. After all that studying, I, for one, can barely remember my periodic table now. What does endure, though, is the curiosity to question, the discipline to reason and the courage to face the unknown.

Dai Wenyuan, a 43-year-old genius-class graduate and global coding competition champion from 20 years ago, told me that he sees talent as China’s key advantage in a global AI race. “There have been more than 1,000 registered generative AI models [in China], which is unthinkable elsewhere, because where else do you find teams of engineers enough to build on such scale?” he said.

In 2014, Dai founded Fourth Paradigm, an AI software business that has made him a billionaire. On the side, he still coaches the coding competition team at his alma mater, Shanghai Jiao Tong University. “I’ve witnessed first hand how China has grown from having zero AI talent 20 years ago to mass producing them,” he said. “Some of our most cutting-edge work is now done by fresh graduates. The real geniuses to change the world soon could well be among them.”

Zijing Wu is the FT’s Asia tech correspondent

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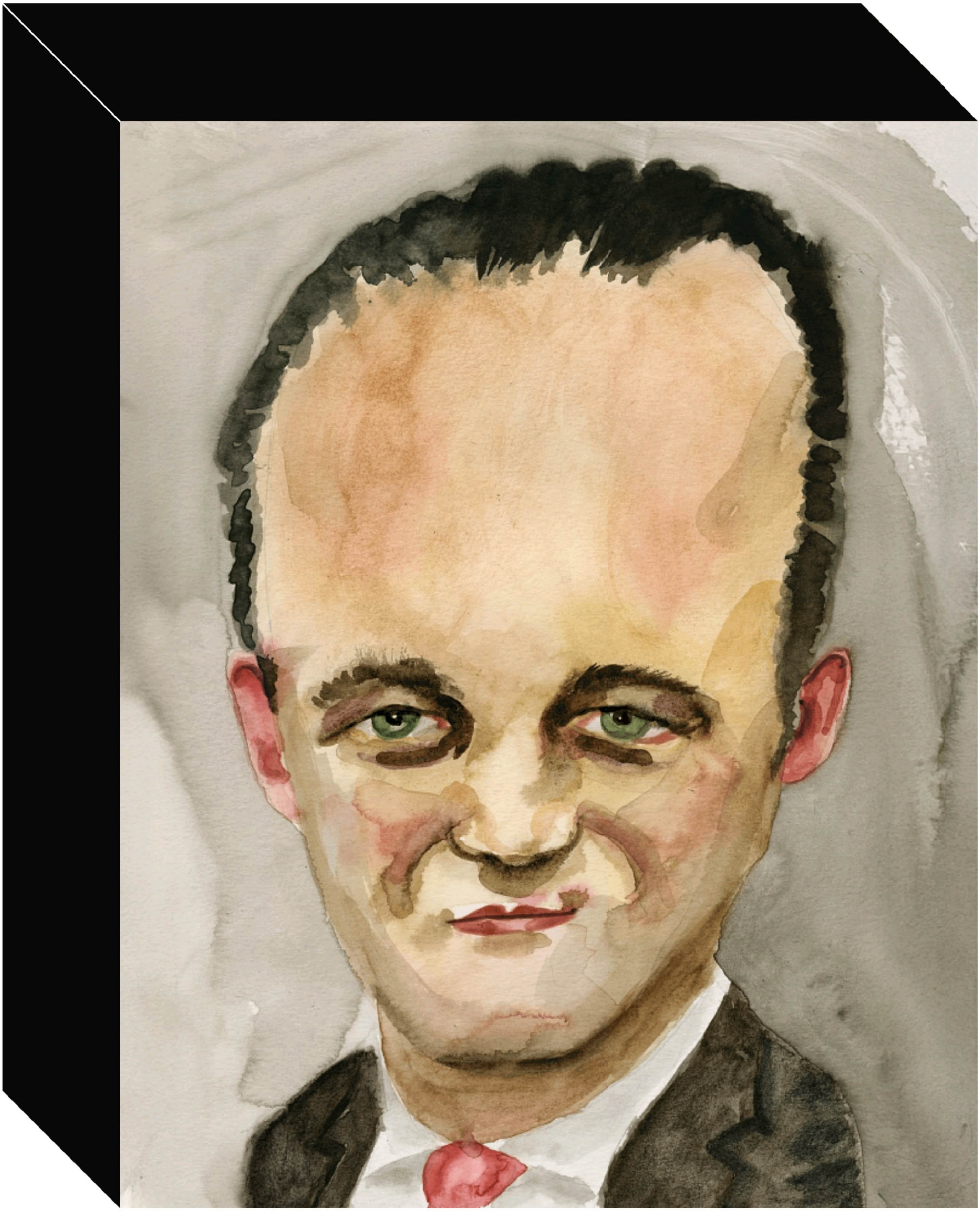


A Serious Man

PIERRE LOUVRIER

HOW A WELL-CONNECTED BELGIAN WITH AN EXTRACURRICULAR INTEREST IN DIPLOMACY APPOINTED HIMSELF AS A HIGH-LEVEL GO-BETWEEN IN THE BUSINESS, FINANCIAL AND RELIGIOUS WORLDS

BY COURTNEY WEAVER

PORTRAIT BY **WILFRID WOOD**

It was a Friday afternoon in early autumn 2025, and Pierre Louvrier was doing what currently comprises much of his life's work: entertaining. Louvrier, 52, had spent the morning ferrying a well-known US tech billionaire around the Vatican and then hosting a three-course lunch in his honour at a five-star hotel.

Now we were standing in Louvrier's Roman pied-à-terre, where a small number of lunch guests had migrated for a sort of after-party. One of them, a former Russian MP, chatted amiably with a retired US Air Force lieutenant general. But Louvrier, tanned and trim, with a slightly possessed gaze, was preoccupied with the ballooning guest list for an evening cocktail reception. "Boyfriends, girlfriends..." Louvrier said in his Gallic accent. Then his attention turned back to his current guests. Keen to set the mood, he put some music on the speaker and opened a bottle of wine.

A well-connected Catholic with an extracurricular interest in diplomacy, Louvrier comes from a long line of people who have looked upon hosting as a life's vocation. Growing up in his middle-class household in Belgium, he watched his parents make a point of cultivating a network of foreign acquaintances. His grandmother, he likes to recall, always set an extra place at the table in case of unannounced guests.

Over the past decade, Louvrier has parlayed this talent to forge high-level connections in the religious, political and business worlds. More recently, he has gone further, elevating himself as a self-anointed go-between for Russia and the west in the ongoing conflict over Ukraine. Through his foundation, Louvrier routinely organises formal discussions inside the Vatican for individuals judged to have some influence on either side of the conflict, and helps generate white-paper proposals on potential economic deals for Russia and western nations that have made their way into the current round of peace talks.

The set-up has raised eyebrows, most notably during the Senate confirmation hearing of Tulsi Gabbard as US Director of National Intelligence last year. Gabbard was among those who travelled to Rome at the expense of Louvrier's foundation. With a peace deal now in sight, some question the role that groups like Louvrier's have played in the sausage making and what will be waiting for those players if commercial business between Russia and the west resumes.

In mid-January of this year, Louvrier says he was apprehended at Heathrow airport by seven agents from the UK's counterterrorist unit. They took his phone and computer data and questioned him for five hours about the nature of his ties to Russia and the work of his peace initiative at the Vatican, he says. Louvrier insisted he has done nothing wrong. "For some reason, they're afraid, but afraid of what? Look, we're just Boy Scouts."

Louvrier said he has merely spent the past four years working with like-minded associates on what they refer to as a "Schuman Plan 2.0", a reference to the famed 1950 proposal, named after French statesman Robert Schuman, which was the first step towards the eventual creation of the Eurozone. While he prefers discretion, he agreed to speak to me because it was time the group's work came out into the open.

Louvrier was born in a small town in west Belgium in 1973. He grew up speaking multiple languages and had ambitions to one day enter politics, a dream he said he was disabused of during a disappointing internship for a Belgian minister.

He went into business instead, including a non-technical role at a Java start-up and positions in management consulting. One evening, while attending a reception connected with the Belgian foreign ministry, he happened to cross paths with a striking Russian woman. The woman, he would learn, was a part-time model and the daughter of a high-ranking Soviet apparatchik. She told him she was working with Belgian diplomats as a Russian language professor. Louvrier began an affair with the woman.

Louvrier had dreams of exploring Russia. Eventually, she took him to Moscow, introducing him to the city's elite. When Louvrier later expressed interest in building a business career in Russia, she was more than happy to help, introducing him to various Russian businessmen visiting Europe.

In 2008, Louvrier decided to follow his Russian dream in earnest, taking a relatively junior role at KPMG as an associate director in corporate finance. He left the firm after only a few months but his girlfriend had previously introduced him to the owner of one of Russia's biggest car dealerships. Louvrier became an investor in the company. Other investments followed, in software, agriculture and more.

Louvrier was pleasantly surprised how easy it was to find business opportunities. Deals seemed to appear at his doorstep, simply by virtue of the fact that he was a westerner. What's more, he was able to keep his risk exposure relatively low, with prospective partners willing to structure deals in a way where Louvrier was required to put very little, if any, of his own capital into the businesses.

His dealmaking was aided by his social life. As a 20-year-old student in Brussels, Louvrier had taken to hosting salons, inviting prominent European politicians to attend small gatherings, a surprising number of whom accepted. In Moscow, Louvrier quickly found the invitations were coming to him. Every evening, it seemed, there was another.

One night, at an art exhibition, Louvrier met a well-connected one-time Russian lawmaker, who later suggested he get to know Konstantin Malofeyev, an Orthodox private-equity tycoon who would soon be sanctioned by the west. Like Louvrier, Malofeyev highly valued both profitable business deals and his Christian faith. They met several times, and Louvrier eventually invited Malofeyev on a trip with him to the Vatican, where Louvrier had already forged some connections after spending time studying philosophy at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome.

After Russia invaded Crimea in early 2014, Louvrier began preparing to exit the Russian market and spend more time in Europe, specifically Geneva and Rome. But his previous life followed him. That November, Malofeyev, by now sanctioned for providing vital support to Russia's undercover war efforts in east Ukraine, gave an interview to a Russian newspaper in which he announced he was now "collaborating" with Louvrier and taking a stake in the management company of Louvrier's investment fund.

A press release posted on Malofeyev's website announced the two men would now be partners in a new joint venture with a planned €2bn in investments, with a quote from Louvrier celebrating the deal. Louvrier told me he had been caught off-guard by Malofeyev's interview, claiming he and Malofeyev had never agreed on any joint venture or investment. (Asked by the FT about Louvrier and the joint venture, Malofeyev declined to comment.)

The following year, Louvrier's Russian past came back to scupper a potentially lucrative deal. He had been working to buy one of Bulgaria's largest and deeply indebted telecoms companies for an appealing €1. But Bivol, a Bulgarian investigative outlet, soon unearthed some of Louvrier's more questionable social media posts: a photo with Louvrier and Igor Girkin – the former Russian intelligence officer who led Russia's 2014 covert invasion in eastern Ukraine – whom he called "a contemporary hero"; a picture with the pro-Russian film star Gérard Depardieu which he captioned "Celebrating #Crimea's re-unification to #Russia"; a picture of Louvrier and a friend, in camo, with paint ball guns, under the caption: "To Kiev!" The deal fell through.

Louvrier was left to spend more and more time in Italy, where he had previously purchased a villa in the countryside. Though Louvrier had not been sanctioned himself, his association with Malofeyev meant his bank accounts had been frozen.

'WE DON'T TALK ABOUT WARS. WE TALK ABOUT PEACE'
PIERRE LOUVRIER

In Rome, he gradually began forging relationships in the world of Italian politics. His apartment was a one-minute walk from the parliament. One Italian politician friend would be complaining about another Italian politician friend, and Louvrier told me he would invite them over to his place to hash it out. Those conversations and connections, once again, helped him expand his network.

ON SOCIAL MEDIA, AS IN HIS DAY-TO-DAY LIFE, LOUVRIER CASTS HIMself as a bon vivant. His posts feature yacht and ski vacations, paired with motivational hashtags like #livewithpassion. He favours a linen-forward wardrobe and has a preference for leaving the top three buttons of his shirt open. He has struck up friendships – including with Depardieu – by staying at one of Geneva's most famous luxury hotels for extended periods of time. The main picture on his Wikipedia page is a selfie.

One professional acquaintance of Louvrier's from Moscow said he had always come off to him as a sort of "Belgian aristocrat" who was "equal parts charming and mysterious". But, the person said, Louvrier's motives had always eluded him. In their conversations, he deduced that Louvrier had "high-level links" on the Russian side and even higher connections in the Vatican. "He's a very charming man. But you always had the impression that you had absolutely no idea what was actually going through his head," the acquaintance said.

Louvrier has never served in government nor been affiliated with the higher-profile institutions of professional foreign affairs. Yet in many ways he embodies the ways diplomacy has changed in the past decade. The biggest diplomatic achievements of Donald Trump's second term have been stage-managed not by career diplomats and administrators, but by outsiders with more experience in making money than signing treaties, most without a formal position or mandate. Jared Kushner, for example, has been brokering a peace deal between Israel and Hamas in Gaza and serving as a key point-person on Ukraine, despite having no plans to rejoin the administration.

It is not just people in Trump's inner circle who are taking on this mantle. Samuel Charap, a senior political scientist at RAND, the US think-tank, noted the conflict between Russia and the west had created an opportunity for a particular type of personality to flourish. "It's people trying to be a fixer in a situation where normal communication channels have broken down," he explained. Fiona Hill, a former adviser to Trump on Russia, told me that during his first administration, the adults-in-the-room were charged with keeping individuals like Louvrier out – "the stray voltage" – as she put it. "Now it's not stray voltage; it's the full-on current."

Louvrier may not be well-known in western policy circles, but he tends to surround himself with people who are. He knows Gabbard, for instance, and has met a host of other senior Trump officials, including vice-president JD Vance. Louvrier's foundation has been heavily promoted by Mick Mulvaney, Trump's former chief of staff. Louvrier also cultivated influential thinkers on the right; Jordan Peterson has been to stay at his villa.

Louvrier said his friend Matteo Renzi, the former Italian prime minister, gave him the idea for the Vatican gatherings. It was February 2022, and the two had planned for an overdue catch-up. Then came Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. What followed was a four-hour lunch in Louvrier's apartment. "We – I – decided to create something that would go to the root causes of the problem," he recalled. "That is, how can we live in peace with each other? How can we contribute to each other?"

Through his organisation, the Clementy Schuman Legacy Foundation, Louvrier arranged the first meeting in July 2022. There have been close to a dozen since. At these discussions, Louvrier invites various guests to Rome – sometimes on their dime; sometimes on his foundation's. He hosts them for a couple of days either at his villa outside the city or in Rome, where they are wined and dined.

Though the formal plenary sessions are held at the Vatican and at least one Catholic priest sits on the organisation's board, Louvrier's foundation is not formally affiliated with the Vatican, but is able to rent the Academy of Sciences facility for its events, thanks to its connections and the fact its own goals correspond with the academy's founding principles.

Conferences and symposia are, of course, a regular feature of the think-tank and diplomatic worlds. But the Clementy Schuman Legacy Foundation is unusual in that it is not a registered non-profit and has just two employees. All the foundation's expenses, Louvrier told me, are currently coming out of private funds, either his own, those of his family members or money belonging to the family of his current girlfriend, an Italian lawyer who also sits on the foundation's board.

The foundation is named after Schuman, who as noted on its website, was a "devout Catholic" who "never sought power for its own sake". Louvrier, however, said he always personally identified more with Jean Monnet, the cognac-selling businessman who played a pivotal role in bringing the 1950 Schuman plan to realisation. It was the Schuman declaration, arguably, with Monnet's input, that first birthed the idea of Europe as a single political entity and created a shared economic interest between the member states, starting in the coal and steel sectors, thereby preventing future wars on the continent.

Seventy-five years later, against the backdrop of the war in the Ukraine, a similar economic agreement could be created between Russia and the west – with equally good results, Louvrier argued. As part of his work, he and other board members have pitched the foundation to 2,000 individuals and met with more than 300 people, he said.

There are two ground rules for meetings held by the Clementy Schuman Legacy Foundation: no bad-mouthing any individual or nation and, oddly, no speaking directly about the conflict in Ukraine, although Louvrier said some previous attendees included Ukrainians. "We don't talk about wars," Louvrier told me by way of explanation. "We talk about peace."

The main focus of the foundation is the joint economic prosperity of Russia and the west through shared commercial projects. The future of Ukraine and its relationships with the west and Russia are more of an afterthought.

> PEACE COULD BE MORE COMMERCIALLY LUCRATIVE THAN WAR

When I asked Louvrier about his views on Russia's role in the war, he was evasive. He was similarly circumspect on what the foundation's actual goals were. "We are not there to accomplish anything in the sense that… we don't do diplomacy, we don't do politics." Instead, he explained, it was more about promoting the Schuman- and Monnet-inspired concepts that peace could be more commercially lucrative than war.

Early last year, not long after the official US-Russian delegations met for the first time since the war began, a contact of mine passed on a white paper Louvrier's foundation had helped craft before Trump took office. The US and Russia were suddenly talking about joint US-Russian economic deals, the solution the foundation had been proposing to end the conflict.

When I started asking around about Louvrier's and the foundation's level of influence in the talks, I got different reactions. A key player in the Ukraine conflict from the previous US administration said he'd never heard Louvrier's name. A second ex-US administration official, who has had some dealings with Louvrier, said he was sceptical of how much traction Louvrier actually had. "I think that most people have reacted to him the same way I have, which is very deep suspicion of his ties with Russian intelligence and not seeing him playing a genuine and useful role," the ex-official said. "I'm sure he will have reached out to lots of people, and I think you don't see the obvious people talking with him or aligned with him in any way." Louvrier dismissed the criticism. "Some people can attack me ad hominem. So be it. I don't care." He said the foundation sometimes had to "skim" its meetings from "tourists", some of whom have been "upset not to be invited again".

Louvrier would not speak on the record about the impact the foundation has had on the peace talks, but provided enough circumstantial evidence off the record to suggest it had been able to pass messages to some of the top negotiators. "August 2024, talking about peace was almost a criminal offence," he said. "Now, everybody talks about peace. And you can trace that to a lot of people who came to [our] meetings that are now in government and working for peace."

Louvrier's past affiliations still dog him. Last January, two days before Gabbard's Senate confirmation hearing, the New York Times published a piece alleging the soon-to-be US director of national intelligence had faced "special scrutiny" travelling into the US after attending a Vatican meeting that had been "organised by a European businessman who appeared on an FBI watch list". Two days later, US Senator Mark Warner, a Democrat, name-checked Louvrier in the hearing, bringing up his links to Malofeyev. Gabbard was confirmed anyway. And Louvrier's Vatican meetings went on.

Louvrier says he has no links to Malofeyev. "Any serious intelligence agency knows I have zero f***ing contact with Malofeyev," Louvrier told me, losing his composure for one of the only times in our discussions. "In fact, if they do their homework correctly, they know we have fought… And I brought him to court, exactly for saying we were partners." As far as he knows, he's not on any FBI watch list, he says.

Over the past few months, the tenor of the negotiations has dramatically changed. On the US side, Kushner and Steve Witkoff, a former real-estate developer who has been serving as Trump's foreign envoy on Gaza and Russia, have been travelling to Moscow and Abu Dhabi to meet with Russian counterparts, including Kirill Dmitriev, the Harvard- and Stanford-educated head of Russia's sovereign wealth fund, and Yuri Ushakov, a Kremlin aide. In the talks, the State Department and Russian foreign ministry have been effectively sidelined, with Washington and Moscow coming at the negotiations from a commercial angle – the exact approach that Louvrier and his foundation have been pushing for all along.

For Louvrier, a revival of US-Russian business projects in energy, raw materials, intellectual property and technology wouldn't merely be an ideological win. Over the past year, I've learnt, the foundation has been exploring making large eight- and nine-figure investments to companies whose founders were involved in the foundation's peace project.

When I asked Louvrier about the foundation's commercial plans, he was vague. The foundation was currently being officially registered for the investments it was making, something he said would happen in the coming months. The assets, he said, would be financed on the market. The funding would come from Louvrier, his girlfriend and her family, while the dividends earned would go back to the Holy See, the Pontifical Academy and the foundation's own budget, allowing the foundation to significantly scale its operation with an operating budget on par with other global foundations, he claimed.

One participant in the foundation's events said he was "surprised" when Louvrier called him expressing interest in investing hundreds of millions of dollars in the company he's currently building. A second told me he had been put in touch with Louvrier by a mutual contact. For the past year, Louvrier had been pursuing an investment in this person's company in the "tens of millions" of dollars, which would involve Louvrier taking a seat on the board. The person approached his board about the investment. They were sceptical. "There's no record, you know, of who they are. There's no prior history of investments."

The person said he was doubtful, until he attended one of Louvrier's events at the Vatican. Suddenly, he found himself rubbing shoulders with an internationally known motivational speaker, executives from a large tech company and a member of the Nobel Prize Committee. "I keep going back and forth on this, like, are they plotting? Are they actually making progress?" he wondered. The proposed investment had yet to materialise.

LAST AUTUMN, I ASKED LOUVRIER IF I COULD COME TO ONE OF THE foundation's meetings. To my surprise, he agreed – with two conditions. One, that I did not disclose the names or titles of anyone in attendance, or what was said. And two, that I agreed to contribute my own thoughts on the conflict as a longtime Russia watcher.

When I arrived for the meeting, Rome was in the throes of a seemingly endless Indian summer. I joined Louvrier, a handful of other participants and the US tech billionaire for lunch at the five-star hotel and a conversation largely about China, space and AI. A smaller group then headed over to Louvrier's apartment for the music and wine, followed by the evening cocktail reception with a broader guest list, including an associate of King Charles, a member of a European royal family and multiple high-ranking former European officials.

The next morning, Louvrier invited us to join him for mass, which he tries to attend every day at the church next to his apartment, before heading to the main event at the Vatican's Academy of Sciences.

When we arrived the Vatican gardens were awash with visiting tours, meandering up the gravel and dirt paths. Inside the academy, participants mingled at a coffee buffet underneath the centuries-old frescoes and mosaics, before filing into a square conference room. Name plates had been placed across the two quadrangular rows. Up on the wall, the dead eyes of the bust of Pope Pius XI watched over the marbled room.

As a rule, Louvrier does not invite any Russian who has been sanctioned, curtailing the pool of eligible individuals from Moscow who are able to attend. That means many of the would-be envoys who claim to be able to transmit messages to and from the Kremlin have vague titles from academic associations. Asked about his job, one Russian guest told me vaguely that he spent most of the time on the road "building bridges". When I asked some of the non-Russian guests how they had ended up connected to Louvrier, they had different answers. Some had come through other European politicians, others through people connected to the Trump administration.

In the morning session, Louvrier gave a blow-by-blow account of the way the foundation had moved the needle on the peace talks. After the morning session, participants drifted to the lunch buffet on the upper floor and spilled out on to the academy's famous oval courtyard that connects the four buildings making up the villa. Outside was a loggia dedicated to the great muses, with Salus, the Roman goddess of safety and wellbeing, presiding above them. A snake wrapped around her arm drinks from the glass in her hand.

> **LOUVRIER SAID HE COULD NEVER GO ON THE RECORD PROVING EVERYTHING THE FOUNDATION HAD DONE, NOR WOULD ANYONE ELSE**

At the moment, Louvrier says he is preparing with lawyers to respond to his recent Heathrow detention. A UK counter-terrorism policing spokesperson confirmed the detention of a 50-year-old man, citing the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act, which allows authorities to search and question someone who might be engaged in "hostile activity" as well as examine their electronic devices. Louvrier was quick to tell me that he had not lost his good manners during the interrogation, joking with the agents and seizing the opportunity to regale them with the history of Robert Schuman. "I took care to give them a good time," he quipped. "I was thinking if I had at some point to call a friend, I would have called Tulsi."

A couple of months after my visit to Rome, I had called Louvrier on the phone. His family had just celebrated a visit from Saint Nikolaus, and he had a slight cold. There were things about his story that I still didn't understand. How he had consistently ended up hobnobbing with members of the elite at various points of his life; how he had found the money to make his investments; how close he had been to Malofeyev before the Russian businessman was sanctioned.

Louvrier alleged he and Malofeyev met socially but were never in business together. "The thing is, you can never prove a negative fact, right? So if I tell you, I've never been to London, I cannot prove it," Louvrier told me at one point. He speculated that Malofeyev might have found him an appealing target, because of some of the people Louvrier had on the board of his Russian fund at the time, such as Jean-Pierre Chevènement, France's former minister of defence and the interior, and Jeannot Krecke, the former economy minister of Luxembourg. Maybe, Louvrier posited, "he thought thanks to that he would be moved away from sanctions".

Louvrier said his Instagram posts celebrating Crimea's reunification with Russia and joking about invading Kyiv had been in bad taste. "I was younger. There is no excuse, right? But it was a joke." He said he had met Girkin, the former Russian intelligence officer and associate of Malofeyev, at a charity dinner benefiting Russian orphans. He claimed he had been told that Girkin was the director of the orphanage and that was why he had posted the photo with him calling him "a contemporary hero".

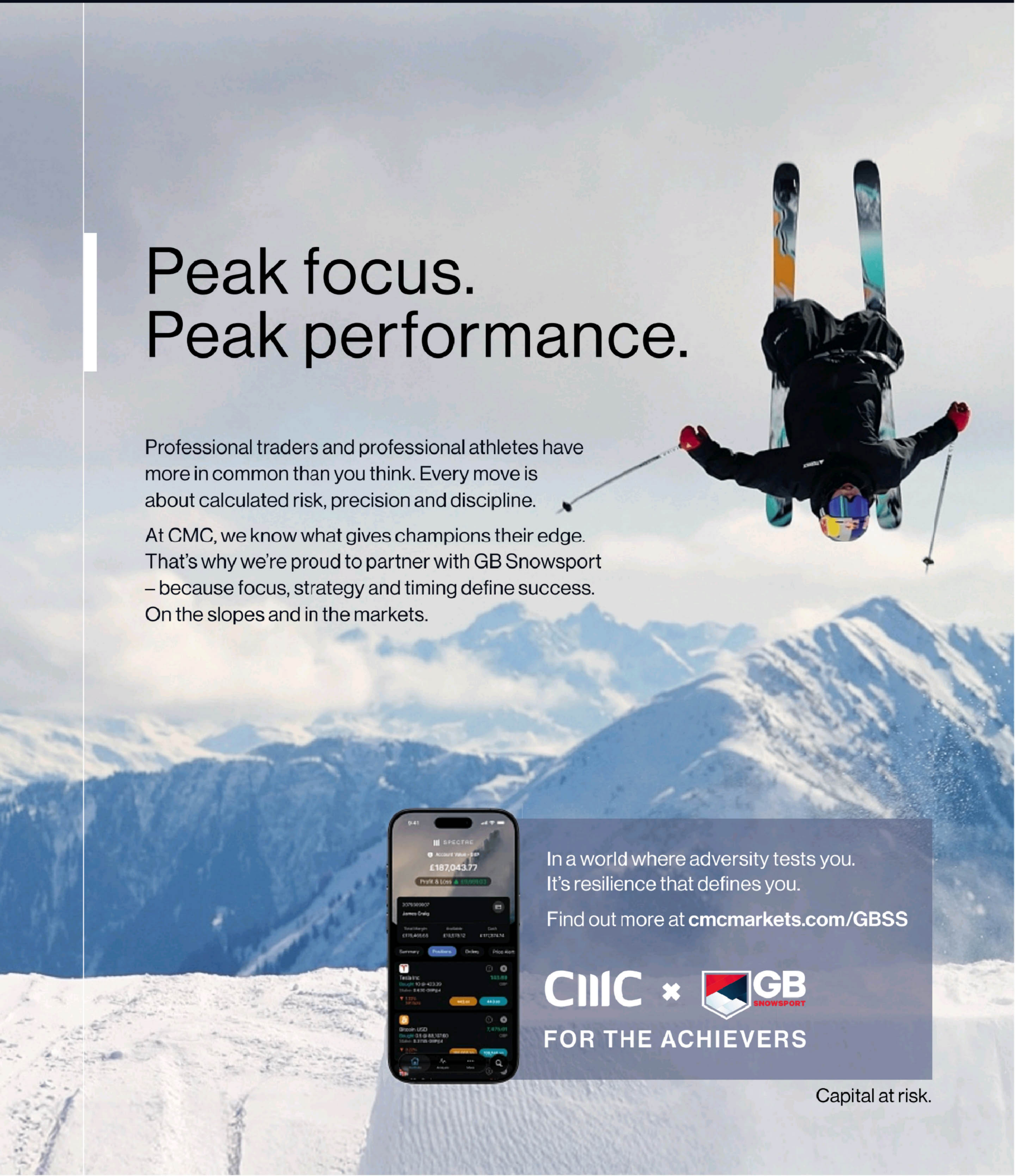
In Russia, he had made connections the way he always has. "It's one person that you know, you trust, introducing you to another person who is known by them and trusted by them. So that's already a good filter." The initial connections, he reiterated, had come from introductions made by the woman he was involved with at the time.

I asked Louvrier if he ever wondered whether he had been used by anyone – or any agency – over the course of his career. One incident came to mind. The Bulgaria episode, where he said he had fallen "in a pit of snakes". "At some point, it was absolutely clear that I was the useful idiot in the situation. Absolutely clear. And that's why I wanted out."

When I pressed him on whether something similar might have happened in Russia, he dismissed the idea. Louvrier said he could never go on the record proving everything the foundation had done, nor would anyone else. He insisted again that he had no personal interest in getting in on the joint economic deals that he still believed will be announced, at some point, between Russia and the US.

His foundation, he reiterated, had been the first party to put all these deals down on paper. Those deals, he insisted, were going to release "massive prosperity". But not, he was quick to add, for him personally. "What's being said publicly is only the tip of the iceberg," he promised. "And unfortunately, we will not touch anything." FT

Courtney Weaver is the FT's special correspondent for eastern Europe.
Additional reporting by Helen Warrell



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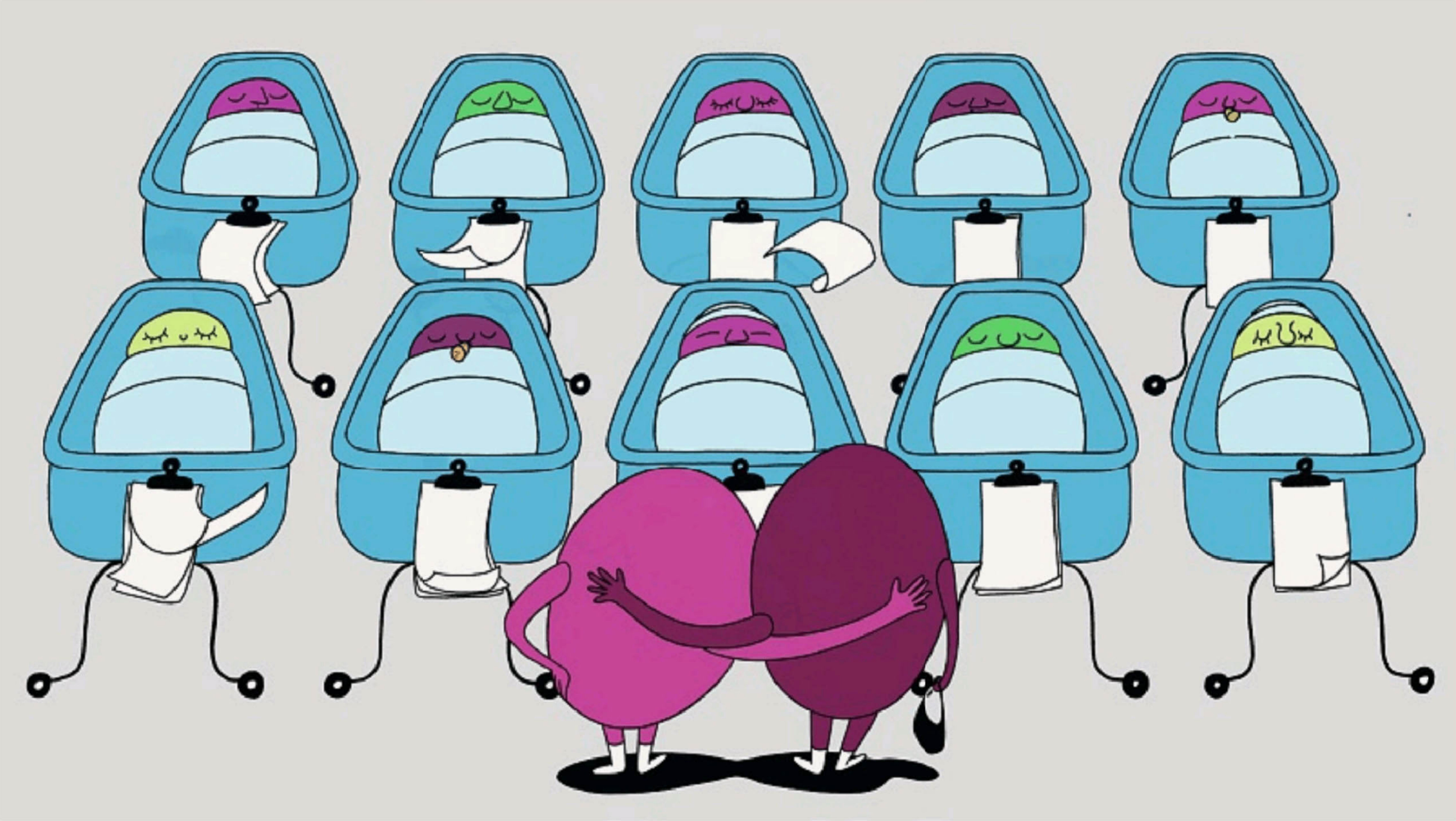
INSIDE A family dinner with Oli Brown and Rowley Leigh **P34**

Appetites



Wine

Next-gen grapes

by JANCIS ROBINSON

ILLUSTRATION *by* DEBORA SZPILMAN

One massive change in the range of wines available today is the proliferation of grape varieties, even when compared with 10 years ago. Indeed, nowadays I often attend professional tastings at which there isn't a single Cabernet Sauvignon on the table, and only a handful of Chardonnays.

Among better-known alternative varieties, Malbec has had its years in the sun thanks to the skill of Argentina's wine producers. Uruguay has done the same for Tannat. Grenache/Garnacha has become far more respected and popular than it used to be, as witnessed by the fine examples now being made all over Spain and in Australia, where there is also considerable experimentation with the lauded grape of Barolo and Barbaresco, Nebbiolo.

All over Europe, local grapes are being substituted for the international darlings Cabernet and Chardonnay. Austrians, for instance, are now intensely proud of their Grüner Veltliner, Blaufränkisch and even Zweigelt. Throughout Italy, the country's myriad indigenous vines, notably but by no means

JANCIS RECOMMENDS

LESS FAMILIAR GRAPES

WHITES

ASSYRTIKO

- **Three Bowls Assyrtiko 2025 PGI Peloponnese (12.5%)**
  £15 MALTBY & GREEK
- **Kokotos Estate Assyrtiko 2024 PGI Attica (14%)**
  £19.75 MALTBY & GREEK

VIDIANO

- **Douloufakis, Dafnios Vidiano 2025 PGI Crete (13.5%)**
  £19.90 MALTBY & GREEK, ALSO VINAGOGO
- **Oenops Vidiano 2023 PGI Crete (13%)**
  £24.95 VIN COGNITO AND MANY OTHER RETAILERS

XYNISTERI

- **Tsiakkas Xynisteri 2024 PGI Lemesos (12.5%)**
  £22 AMATHUS

ENCRUZADO

- **Quinta dos Roques 2023 Dão (13.5%)**
  £23.50 THE WINE SOCIETY

ARINTO (SERCIAL)

- **Azores Wine Co, Arinto dos Azores 2024 Pico (12%)**
  £38.50 AMATHUS

ALIGOTÉ

- **Bourgogne Aligoté 'Le Grand A' David Moret, Burgundy 2024 (12.5%)**
  £24.50 VIN COGNITO

REDS

XINOMAVRO

- **Three Bowls Xinomavro 2024 Naoussa (13.5%)**
  £16 MALTBY & GREEK
- **Thymiopoulos, Earth and Sky 2023 Naoussa (13.5%)**
  £25 THE WINE SOCIETY
- **Magoutes Vineyards Xinomavro, 2020 PGI Siatista (13%)**
  £29.50 MALTBY & GREEK
- **Melitzani Estate Xinomavro 2017 Naoussa (13.5%)**
  £30 MALTBY & GREEK

MENCÍA

- **Ponte da Boga, P Mencía 2023 Ribeira Sacra (12%)**
  £18.95 THORNE WINES
- **2014 Descendientes de J Palacios, Las Lamas 2014 Bierzo (13.5%)**
  £99.99 MORGAN EDWARDS

TROUSSEAU

- **Dom Tissot, Singulier Trousseau 2023 Arbois Rouge (13.5%)**
  £42 THE WINE SOCIETY

TASTING NOTES, SCORES AND SUGGESTED DRINKING DATES ON JANCISROBINSON.COM. INTERNATIONAL STOCKISTS, WINESEARCHER.COM

exclusively Sangiovese, are being re-evaluated, and all those Supertuscans based on Bordeaux varieties now look rather old hat. French varieties such as Cabernet Franc and Chenin Blanc that might once have been regarded as "second tier" are getting the respect they deserve and can be found well outside their stronghold, the Loire Valley. Hotspots include the higher reaches of Mendoza in Argentina for Cabernet Franc and many a South African wine district for Chenin Blanc.

Sauvignon Blanc is now more popular in many quarters – including Napa Valley – than the world's most-planted pale-skinned grape Chardonnay, and its relative Sauvignon Gris has become a regular blending partner with it in dry white bordeaux. Galicia's Albariño and Godello have proved that Spain can produce top quality dry whites as well as reds, and their names are increasingly found on labels around the world – not just locally.

But how about more obscure grape varieties? Here are a few of my current favourites, more whites than reds.

Greece is an extraordinarily fertile hunting ground. Few wine drinkers who spend any time on the popular holiday island of Santorini fail to fall for its leading white wine grape Assyrtiko (sometimes blended with the equally local Aïdani and Athiri). Peter Barry of Jim Barry Wines in South Australia's Clare Valley was one of those tourists. After years of plant quarantine, he began producing creditable Australian Assyrtiko in 2017. The grape is brilliantly suited to warm or even hot climates as it retains its refreshing acidity, as well as a beguiling sort of lemony pungency. It is one of the most successful "Mediterranean" varieties imported into South Africa by leading Swartland producer Eben Sadie for his Sadie Family wines.

The island of Crete has its own special, acid-retaining grapes, of which Vidiano is probably the most promising, but unlike Assyrtiko it doesn't seem to have travelled very far – yet. Like so many of these lesser-known grapes, it almost became extinct when the world grew obsessed with a handful of "international" grapes. (Even a variety as popular today as Viognier was in danger of disappearing altogether from its home in the northern Rhône in the 1960s, as was my beloved Godello in its native Valdeorras in Galicia in the 1970s.) Vidiano is probably the most intensely fruity Cretan white wine grape but there is no shortage of them, including Dafni, named after the laurel that powerfully informs its aroma. Superior examples of the Xynisteri of Cyprus are also worth seeking out.

A range of red-wine grapes such as Kotsifali and Liatiko are also being rediscovered on Crete but the most obvious current choice for a Greek dark-skinned variety is the much more widely planted Xinomavro. It has recently come to the fore as a less expensive alternative to the Nebbiolo of Piemonte. Like Nebbiolo, it produces relatively pale reds that are high in both acidity and tannin. It's the signature – indeed only – grape of Naoussa and Amyndeo in Greek Macedonia.

UK specialist importer Maltby & Greek has just launched the Three Bowls range of three Greek wines, which would serve as excellent introductions to Assyrtiko and Xinomavro, including a pale rosé that's a blend of the two.

Like Greece, Portugal can boast a rich assortment of indigenous grape varieties and has largely escaped Cabernet- and Chardonnay-worship. The obvious candidates are dark-skinned port varieties such as the Touriga Nacional, which probably originated in the Dão region of central northern Portugal and has now been planted all over the warming world. But I have a very soft spot for Dão's Encruzado grape, which can

All over Europe, local grapes are being substituted for the international darlings Cabernet and Chardonnay

FIRST SIP

HOW ARE GRAPES RELATED?

Now that DNA profiling can be applied to vine varieties, we can trace all sorts of intriguing relationships between them. One of the most significant families has Pinot and an obscure grape called Gouais Blanc at the head with offspring including Chardonnay, Aligoté and the principal grapes of both Beaujolais and Muscadet. The extended family, in which Savagnin plays a significant role, encompasses more than 150 varieties, including all the well-known Bordeaux grapes, Viognier, Chenin Blanc, Grüner Veltliner, Trousseau and Syrah.

Savagnin is a parent of both Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc. Cabernet Sauvignon turns out to be the offspring of Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc, which historical records suggest probably originated in Basque country in northern Spain and the Loire respectively. Cabernet Franc is also a parent of Merlot.

What the northern Rhône's signature grapes Syrah and Viognier probably have in common is the Savoie grape Mondeuse Blanche as a parent but there are still mysteries to unravel, such as the likely identity of the other parent of Viognier. DNA analysis can reveal a parent-offspring relationship between varieties but not always which is the parent.

produce white wines with the same sort of depth, structure and potential evolution as a serious, oak-matured white burgundy.

Another of my favourite Portuguese pale-skinned grapes is Arinto, which is so widely planted (and often blended) that it is not necessarily much admired, but I love the steely elegance of the best varietal examples. However, the name is applied to many other varieties (grape nomenclature is a minefield). In the resurgent vineyards of the Azores, the Madeira grape Sercial is called Arinto dos Açores. In mainland Portugal, it is known as Esgana Cão (dog strangler) on account of its high acidity. All Arinto wines I have come across are remarkably pure and refreshing. Portugal's most common white-wine grape is known as both Fernão Pires and Maria Gomes. (See what I mean?) It can also be found in South Africa, Portugal having once been a popular staging post for ships en route to the Cape.

Another Iberian favourite of mine is the dark-skinned Mencía grown in Bierzo and on the steep terraces of Ribeira Sacra in the far north-west of Spain. Its wines are so much juicier and more perfumed than those of Spain's most-planted dark-skinned grape Tempranillo. When grown on schist, it can produce complex wines worth ageing.

But French grapes are by no means to be ignored. Burgundy's supposedly "lesser" white wine grape Aligoté, once awfully tart, is now yielding some wonderful wines thanks to warmer summers. An outstanding example is David Moret's Le Grand A, which comes from ancient vines and is treated in the cellar as though it were the finest Chardonnay.

I've long loved the richly floral Trousseau reds of the Jura. But although the variety's home is this eastern subalpine region, it is not widely planted there. Instead it pops up all over the place: in northern Portugal and Madeira as Bastardo; in Galicia called variously Bastardo, Maria Ordoña and Merenzao; and as Trousseau in both California and Oregon. Truly a world traveller.

The pale pink-skinned mutation of Grenache known as Grenache Gris, or Garnacha Roja or Garnatxa Gris in its Spanish homeland, is another favourite. Its wines seem to have much more nerve and character than most Grenache Blancs and it's most commonly found in Roussillon, Languedoc and north-east Spain. It's often blended but is well worth bottling on its own.

Other favourites include the Tintilla de Rota of Cadiz (the same at Rioja's Graciano), Macabeo (the Viura of Rioja), Fronton's Négrette, Italy's Gaglioppo and Timorasso and the Savagnin of Jura. I could go on, but hope already to have sufficiently piqued your thirst for a change from well-trodden paths to familiar bottles. FT

Review

Dover Street Counter, Mayfair

by JAY RAYNER

ILLUSTRATION *by* DANIEL EGNEUS

The Dover St Counter is a cynicism killer. You could try to dismiss it as an advanced exercise in restaurant cosplay; a stab at mimicking a Los Angeles counter restaurant just off London's Piccadilly, through chromium Art-Deco flourishes, tasteful lighting and a crowd-pleasing menu built around hefty sandwiches. But faced by the exquisite attention to detail, it would be hard to maintain the performative eyerolling for long. In any case, many restaurants indulge in a kind of cosplay. Every sushi bar has its Kyoto-style blonde-wood counter, regardless of where it's located. Every French brasserie from New York to Nuneaton has its globe lights and its tarnished mirrors.

Only one thing matters. Does the restaurant deliver on the promise of its design? The answer with the Dover St Counter is, by God yes, plate after beautifully dressed plate. It's the late-night hideaway London needs; the place you want to slip into when you're a few drinks down, so you can pull up a stool at the woozily lit bar and eat the best tuna melt or sauce-clad bowl of pasta or baked cheesecake, like you're the obligatory louche character in Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks". Except the splendid isolation of Hopper's characters will remain a fantasy here. Even with their promise to keep seats back for walk-ins, it's going to be rammed.

FIND IT

DOVER STREET COUNTER

31 Dover Street, London W1S 4ND
020 3866 4420
doverstreetcounter.com

Snacks £7–£16
Soups, salads and sandwiches £9–£19
Mains £18–£39
Desserts £4–£13

Hence, on the way out after lunch, I did the only logical thing. I made a booking for the following week.

The Dover St Counter is one of two new ventures from Martin Kuczmarski, former chief operating officer of the Soho House Group. He opened his account as a solo restaurateur in 2023 with The Dover a few doors down from here. That styles itself as an old-school New York Italian, where the martinis are ice cold, the menu knows one end of a properly made Caesar salad from the other and the meatballs come in a sauce the colour of expensive lipstick. The Dover was immediately warm-your-hands-on-the-glow hot. Then, at the end of last year, came Martino's in Chelsea, his take on the Italian trattoria, followed by this place, a cheaper companion to its nearby sibling. It's clad in shades of caramel, and there is a fine curve to the bar. There are square booths out back, bowed ones in a side room and bar stools with good lumbar support overlooking a kitchen where the cooks all wear black ties under their white aprons.

We have a bowl of still-warm salt and vinegar crisps made from purple potatoes, with a bowl of rough-cut tomato salsa topped with sour cream and lime. We have curling rice crackers dolloped with tuna tartare and a plate of undulating, creviced fried chicken with a chilli hot honey sauce. So far, so very London, circa 2026. It's drunk food that will also work its magic on the sober. After that the menu pursues the holy "counter restaurant" trinity of soups, salads and sandwiches. There is a profoundly nourishing-looking broth of cavolo nero, cabbage and cannellini beans with garlic bread, which I didn't order. There is an iceberg wedge with candied walnuts and ranch dressing, and a Mediterranean chopped salad, both of which I fancied ordering, but also didn't.

My eye scrolled instead past the cheeseburger, the tuna melt and the fried chicken sandwich to that LA classic, the French dip: slices of pink, smoky steak, with the thinnest ribbons of fat, nestled atop a mess of pulled beef, molten, stringy taleggio and pickles, stuffed inside a hunk of sourdough baguette that won't crumble when it meets the accompanying silver boat of meaty gravy. As the name says, you dip one into the other, your napkin stuffed inside your collar as a bib. They will bring you wet wipes unasked. It's a lot of stupidly satisfying, wonderfully messy sandwich for £19. If this hands-on action is above or beneath you, there are cutlery-friendly dishes including meatballs, short rib with peppercorn sauce, and a lightly charred salmon steak with black olives, green beans and new potatoes to earn it the tag "niçoise style". The only pasta dish is spaghetti all'assassina, rarely seen in London, in which the noodles are cooked down in a spiced tomato sauce until it is dry and the base is starting to char and crisp. It will divide the crowd. Some will ask why their pasta is burnt; others, like me, will wonder if it has been burnt enough. Either way the flavour is a deep, sultry slow burn; the edible equivalent of a long 1970s Al Pacino close-up.

THE SHELF BEHIND THE BAR IS STACKED with declarations of intent: spendy Italian and French reds, bottles of Campari, Aperol and Green Chartreuse, and one of Fernet-Branca for those who think it might ease the excess but have forgotten just what an unforgiving punch in the mouth it can be. It's a fine collection of grown-up booze options, to accompany a relatively short wine list serving both those on a casual night out and those who have lost all sense of proportion and now think a 2011 Sassicaia from Tenuta San Guido at £830 is the right the way to go.

Desserts don't quite hit the heights of the rest of the menu. The advertised rum in the caramel sauce with New York cheesecake is on the demure side; the exotic sounding "chocolate ball", since renamed on the menu to reflect its true nature, is just a rather familiar soft choux bun filled with various creams. But both are a solid enough hit of sweet. They play their role. What matters most at Dover St Counter is the way the elements come together to offer that greatest of restaurant intangibles: a delicious, thrumming vibe. With some restaurants it's hard to work out what they're for. Not with this one. It knows exactly what it's doing. And it's doing it brilliantly. FT

jay.rayner@ft.com

The Table

A winter feast

HOSTED *by* OLI BROWN, ROWLEY LEIGH *and* RUTH LEIGH

PHOTOGRAPHY *by* OLA O SMIT

Rowley Leigh became Oli Brown's mentor more than 15 years ago, when Oli trained under the celebrated chef and longtime FT food writer at his restaurant Le Café Anglais. Much has changed since then. Oli is now an esteemed chef in his own right. He's also family, married to Rowley's daughter Ruth, his business partner at Updown Farmhouse, the restaurant and hotel in Kent where they live. They may cook together less often than they once did, but when they do, it's relaxed and instinctive, shaped by mutual affection, shared history and a long-established shorthand.

How do you pull a meal like this together?

Oli Brown: We have a chat.

Rowley Leigh: I ask Oli what he wants me to do, which is fair enough! Or I might say that I've been playing around with something that I want to try.

Oli: I trained under Rowley so it's not going to be too far off the rails…

Ruth Leigh: Similar lines of thought.

Rowley: He's a bigger brush than me. You know, bigger, broader brush. He thinks more robustly, bigger food, big flavours.

Having cooked together for more than 15 years, do you have a system?

Oli: Stay out of each other's way!

Rowley: It's very definitely changed though, because when he was training under me, I was his boss, was delegating stuff to him. Now we're equals.

Oli: It was the foundation really. Although obviously you develop your own style.

What's the most important thing when it comes to hosting a dinner?

Rowley: Enjoy yourself.

Oli: Don't mess about in the kitchen too much. But, yes, enjoy yourself. Don't make it too difficult. Don't try to impress.

Ruth: Don't try and make it restaurant-y.
Oli: Exactly. Straightforward and delicious.

Rowley Leigh is a chef and restaurateur. Oli Brown and Ruth Leigh are the owners of Updown Farmhouse hotel and restaurant in Deal, Kent, where Brown is head chef and Leigh leads front of house

THE MENU

TO SERVE SIX

TO START
Castelfranco salad with pears and blue cheese
•
Octopus, fennel, potato and chilli salad
•
Lasagne bianche

MAINS
Roast duck with radicchio, quince and chestnuts
•
Gnocchi alla Romana

DESSERT
Roulé Marquis

TABLE NOTES

DO IN ADVANCE
To make things easier, get some prep out of the way the day before. You can make the dessert, and prepare the radicchio, gnocchi and lasagne, which you then cook on the day. Leave the duck uncovered in the fridge overnight to dry the skin, which helps make it crispy.

• • •

DO ON THE DAY
If you're feeling committed and decide to cook the octopus yourself, this should be done first thing in the morning since it takes five or six hours. Next cook the radicchio, and then the duck a couple of hours before serving. Once done, cover with foil and keep in a warm oven. Then cut the gnocchi up and bake it. Put the lasagne in the oven 40 minutes before serving. While that's cooking, make the salads.

WINE

Rowley: I always look for geographical closeness when it comes to wine, especially when serving a lot of different things. The salad of Castelfranco radicchio is northern Italian. The octopus is northern Italian. So with this meal, we're drinking a delicious Sylvanera from northern Italy. Rather unusual.

Ruth: And then we've got a delicious Venetian Pinot Nero.

Rowley: Pinot Nero's got a lot of very sweet fruit, but also quite high acidity. So it's great with quite fatty duck. We don't think, "Oh, what should we do with that?" It just comes together naturally.

CASTELFRANCO SALAD WITH PEARS AND BLUE CHEESE

- 1 large head of Castelfranco radicchio
- 3 large ripe pears
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 150g roquefort cheese
- ½ tsp salt
- ½ tsp coarse black pepper
- 1 tbs red wine vinegar
- 4 tbs olive oil (use high-quality oil)
- 50g walnuts

1. Tear the Castelfranco leaves into bite-size pieces. Wash in a large bowl of very cold water, then spin dry and tip into a large salad bowl.
2. Peel the pears and roll them in lemon juice. Halve the pears and scoop out the cores with a teaspoon, then slice them not too thinly and roll them around in the remaining lemon juice to prevent browning.
3. Cut the cheese as best you can and distribute over the salad in the bowl.
4. Whisk the salt, pepper and vinegar in a bowl until the salt is dissolved, then whisk in the olive oil. Drain the pears of their lemon juice and distribute on top of the salad. Scatter the walnuts. Pour over the dressing and toss the salad at the table.

OCTOPUS, FENNEL, POTATO AND CHILLI SALAD

- 125g new potatoes
- 125g fennel
- 3 red chillies
- 30g coriander
- 50g parsley
- Juice of an orange, about 60ml
- Juice of 2 lemons, about 60ml
- 50g sugar
- 200g cooked octopus, diced into 2-3cm cubes (buy good-quality cooked octopus from a deli)
- 80g capers
- 1 clove garlic
- 160ml olive oil (use high-quality oil)
- Sea salt, to taste

1. Peel the potatoes and place in salted water, bring to the boil then turn down and simmer for 15-20 minutes until tender. Remove the potatoes and set aside to cool, keep the water to cook the fennel. Once the potatoes are cool, dice into 2cm cubes.
2. Dice the fennel into roughly 2cm chunks, cook in the same water as the potatoes for about 15 minutes or until soft. Set the fennel aside to cool.
3. Preheat the oven grill to high. Place your chillies on a baking tray and grill until the skin is blackened all over. Put the chillies in a bowl and cover with clingfilm for 10 minutes to allow the skin to separate from the flesh.
4. Place the chillies on a chopping board and with a knife gently remove the blackened skin, then split them in half and remove the seeds. Finely chop the roasted flesh and set aside for later. Discard everything else.
5. Roughly chop the coriander and the parsley.
6. Juice the citrusses and combine together with the sugar.
7. Add the potato, fennel, chillies, herbs, citrus juice, octopus and capers to a large bowl. Finely grate in the raw garlic clove, then pour in the olive oil and season with sea salt. Give everything a good toss and serve.

LASAGNE BIANCHE

- 100g unsalted butter
- 100g plain flour
- 1½ litres full-fat milk
- 10g nutmeg, grated
- Salt, to taste
- Pepper, to taste
- 300g parmesan cheese plus extra for the top of the lasagne, grated
- 200g fontina (grated) or taleggio (diced)
- 1 nice big truffle, white or black
- 1 pack dried lasagne sheets

1. For the béchamel, melt the butter, add the flour and cook for three minutes on medium heat. Add the milk slowly, whisking in continuously. Cook until the sauce is smooth and thickens, roughly 10-15 minutes on a very low heat.
2. Add the nutmeg, salt and pepper to taste. Gently whisk in the different cheeses, cook for a further five minutes, then set aside and keep somewhere warm.
3. Take an ovenproof dish measuring roughly 30cmx20cm and add a layer of béchamel about a centimetre thick to the base, then, using a microplane, grate some truffle over it. Add a layer of dried lasagne sheets. Then another layer of béchamel, truffle and pasta, until you have four nice repeats. Cover the top with another layer of béchamel, then grated parmesan.
4. Bake at 170C for 35-40 minutes, until the pasta is cooked and the top is gratinated and golden. Serve with more truffle grated on top.

ROAST DUCK WITH RADICCHIO, QUINCE AND CHESTNUTS

For the baked radicchio with quince and chestnuts

- 2 quinces (or pears)
- 50ml lemon juice
- 200ml water
- 200ml white wine
- 200g sugar
- 1 star anise
- 2 cloves
- Peel of an orange
- 3 heads radicchio
- 100-150g brown sugar
- 300ml red wine
- 1 pack cooked chestnuts (about 180g)
- 2 bay leaves

1. Peel the quinces, then cut in half lengthways and rub with lemon juice. Add to a medium pan with the water, white wine, sugar, star anise, cloves and orange peel.
2. To poach the quinces, you'll need to make a cartouche – a parchment lid. Cut a square of parchment paper, fold it in half diagonally to form a triangle, then fold it again three more times until you're left with a long, narrow wedge. Measure and trim to fit your pan. The tip of the wedge should hit the centre of the pan, then trim the shortest side so it will fit neatly inside. Snip the tip to create a small hole, which will allow steam to escape when you unfold the paper. Cover the pan with the cartouche and poach the quinces for 35 minutes to an hour, until they have the consistency of very ripe pears. (If using pears, this will take significantly less time.)
3. Once the quinces have cooled, remove them from the pan and reserve the poaching liquid. Cut each quince half into four segments, removing the cores, and set aside.
4. Cut the radicchio in half lengthways and sprinkle over some brown sugar. In a heavy sauté pan, caramelise them, then transfer to a deep baking tray. Add red wine, 100ml of the poaching liquor from the quinces and then sprinkle over the chestnuts.
5. Season the radicchio with salt, add the bay leaves and cover with tin foil. Bake at 170C for about 40 minutes until the radicchio is tender. Dress the radicchio with the baked quinces, then serve alongside the duck.

For the roast duck

- 2kg whole duck
- 3 generous pinches of salt
- 1 onion, quartered
- 2 carrots, roughly chopped
- 2 sticks celery, roughly chopped
- 180ml red wine
- 500ml chicken stock
- 6 sprigs thyme
- 2 cloves garlic
- 50g butter, cold, diced
- 20ml red wine vinegar

1. Season the duck with the salt and place in a roasting tray, then cook for 20 minutes at 220C.
2. Turn the oven down to 170C, add the onion, carrots and celery, then for a medium-rare duck cook for another 20 minutes per kg. If you want the duck cooked through, it's another 35 minutes per kg. Remove the duck and vegetables from the tray and keep somewhere warm.
3. Deglaze the pan with the red wine, transfer to a pan, then reduce by half. Add the chicken stock, thyme and garlic, then simmer for 10 minutes. Turn up the heat and reduce the sauce by two-thirds.
4. Pass the sauce through a sieve and add any resting juices from the duck. Whisk in the butter and red wine vinegar (or to taste).
5. To serve, arrange the duck and vegetables on a platter and spoon over some sauce.

GNOCCHI ALLA ROMANA

- 1l milk
- 100g butter
- Pinch of salt
- 225g semolina
- 4 egg yolks
- 75g parmesan, grated

1. Bring 950ml of milk to the boil with 50g of butter and a pinch of salt. Sprinkle in the semolina, whisking continuously. Bring the mixture to a simmer and keep cooking over a very low heat for at least 20 minutes.
2. Mix the remaining 50ml of milk with the egg yolks and half the parmesan and stir into the mixture, beating until smooth.
3. Melt the remaining 50g of butter and line a small oven tray with greaseproof paper, greased with a little of the melted butter. Pour in the semolina mixture, level and refrigerate for at least an hour.
4. Once set, use a knife to cut the gnocchi into 2.5cm-thick crescents (see picture). Line an oven dish with more of the melted butter and place th
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- 4 eggs, separated
- 15g potato starch or cornflour
- 50g cocoa powder
- 150g raspberry jam
- Framboise eau de vie (optional)
- 250ml double cream
- 450g raspberries

For the Melba sauce
- 150g raspberries
- 2 tbs golden caster sugar
- Juice of 1 lemon

1. Preheat the oven to 190C and line a 35cmx25cm baking tray with a sheet of buttered greaseproof paper.
2. Sift the icing sugar, put it into an electric mixer with the egg yolks, then whisk until very pale and white. Pour this mixture into another bowl, clean the mixer bowl thoroughly then whisk the egg whites into a stiff meringue. Gently fold the two mixtures together.
3. Sift the potato starch (or cornflour) and cocoa powder, sprinkle over then fold lightly into the mixture. Spread the mixture over the baking sheet, using a spatula to make sure it is even. Bake for 15 minutes, or until just set.
4. Once firm but not springy, remove from the oven and cover with a sheet of greaseproof paper. Cover with another baking tray and turn the two over to turn it out without breaking. Melt the jam with a little water so it has the consistency of a very thick soup and add the eau de vie if using. Remove the greaseproof paper then brush the mixture all over the sponge. Cover with another sheet of greaseproof paper and, with the long edge nearest you, roll up and cool.
5. Whip the cream so it just holds firm peaks. Unroll the cake, remove the paper and spread the cream over the cooled cake, leaving a border of 3cm around the edges. Scatter three-quarters of the raspberries over the cream. Roll back up and refrigerate for an hour.
6. For the sauce, put the raspberries in a bowl and toss with the sugar and lemon juice. Leave for at least 30 minutes, then push through a sieve. Serve in a jug with the roulé.
7. Place the roulé on a cake stand or platter and dust with icing sugar. If you're feeling flamboyant and want to complete the proceedings in a very grand way, add evenly spaced dollops of whipped cream along the top, each crowned with a raspberry.

TIPS

SOURCING

k it's so important to think seasonally when it comes to . Not only is it important for the planet but also that's when are delicious. So if you're greedy like we are, you want to st, most delicious things and doing that seasonally is the do it. The quinces are from our garden, the duck is local, are English, as is the octopus. When I say local, I also think , because you want to cast a wide net and pick the best.

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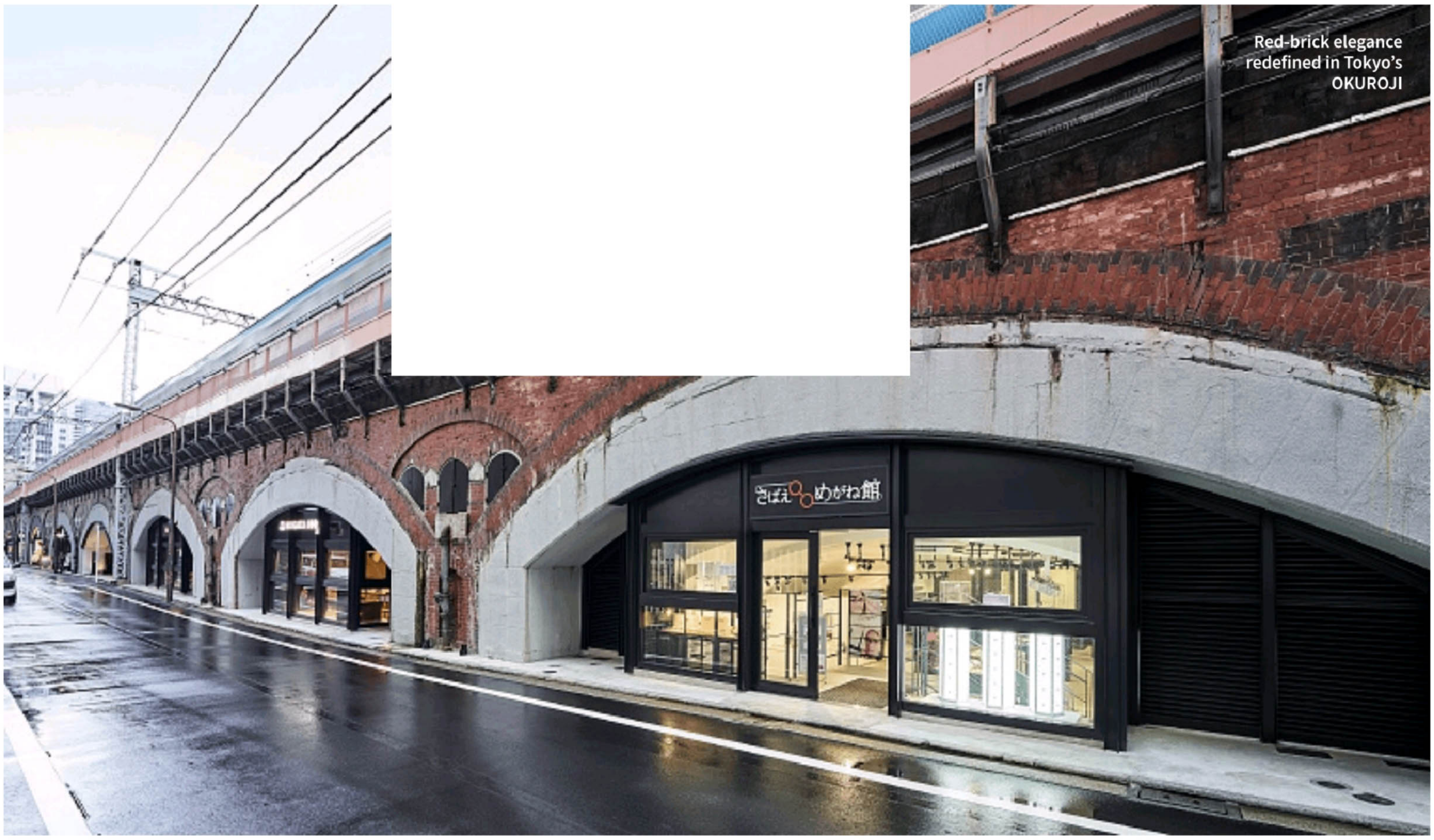
PRESENTATION

n't have anything that's too precious – we don't use really expensive tabling or anything, and we're not too fussed about matching things. Which I feel is a good approach, I don't stress about the odd stain or anything like that. So it's all quite relaxed.

• • •

FLOWERS

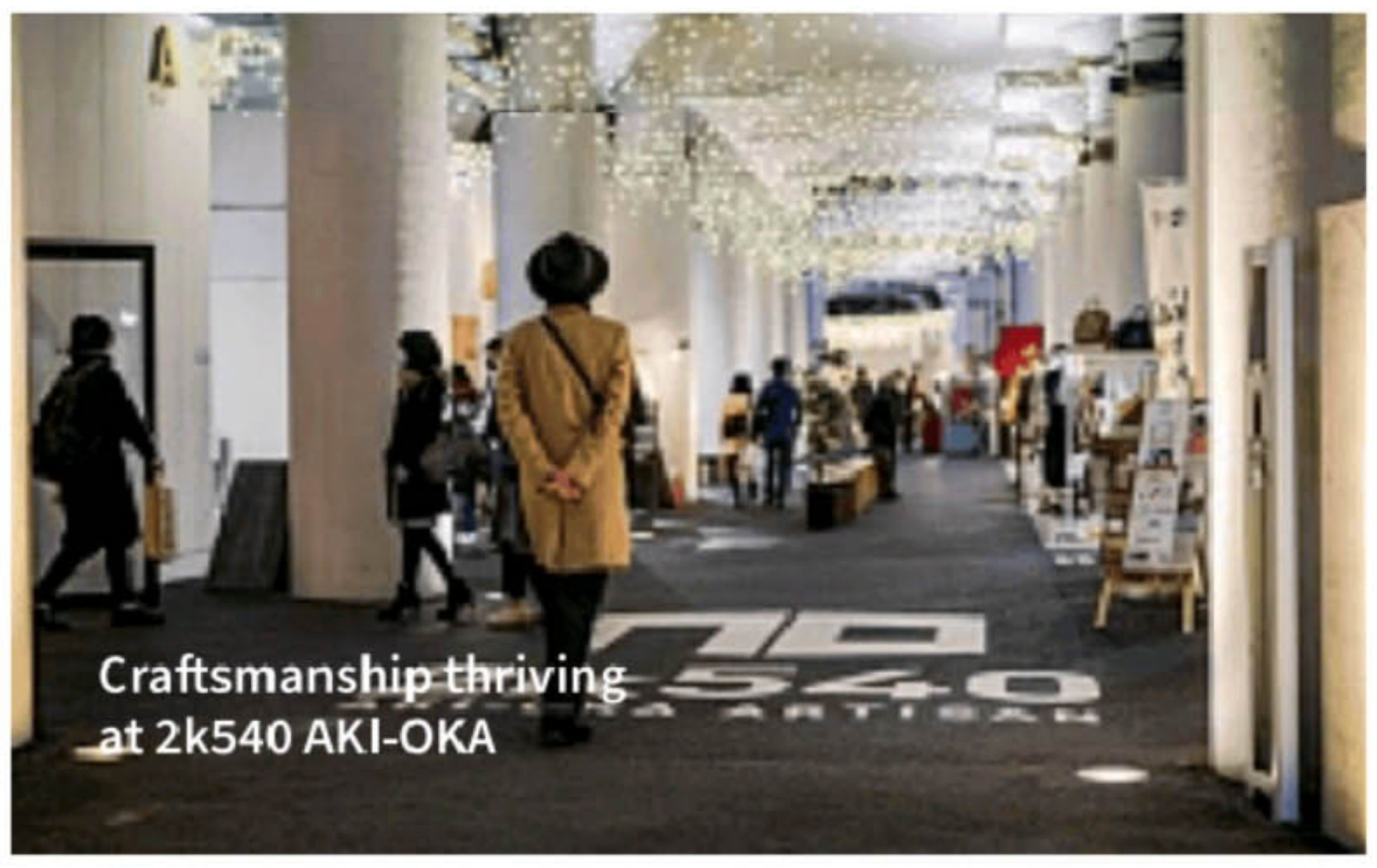
Ruth: You don't have to do anything that's expensive or complicated. We're very lucky – we have a great garden. We grow tonnes of dahlias, which are easy, beautiful and make a great impact. If you grow a statement flower with lots of other things that go well together, you can have beautiful arrangements without having to think about it too much. So schemes where all the colours work together mean you can very easily cut things and make a bouquet. But sometimes we just do greenery, and during winter bits of ivy or holly.



Red-brick elegance redefined in Tokyo's OKUROJI

BENEATH TOKYO'S RAILS, A NEW URBAN CULTURE THRIVE

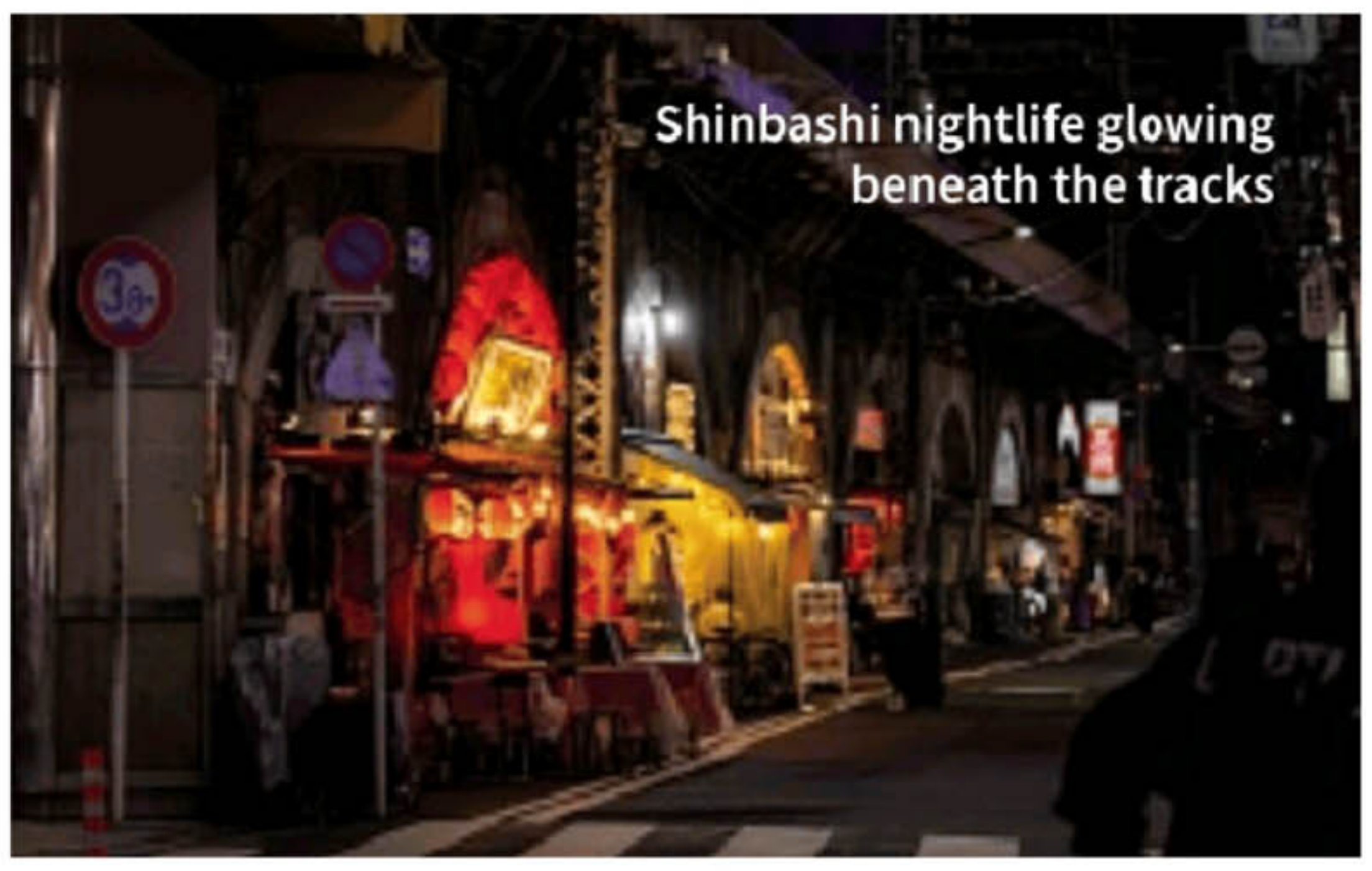
In a city defined by constraint, forgotten spaces under the tracks have become vibrant hubs of creativity and community.



Craftsmanship thriving at 2k540 AKI-OKA

The red-brick arches linking Tokyo's Yurakucho and Shimbashi stations exude a recognisably European charm. Completed in 1910 as part of Japan's first elevated railway, the viaduct was designed under the guidance of a German engineer who drew inspiration from Berlin's own.

A decade later, a lone hot pot stall appeared beneath the arches, serving labourers and travellers moving through the city's new artery. This was to set the precedent for what became a defining feature of Tokyo's urban fabric and cultural history, with the notion of *gādo-shita* – literally meaning 'under the guard' or 'under the girder' – evolving rapidly after World War II.



Shinbashi nightlife glowing beneath the tracks

Cheap taverns and izakaya (pubs) began to spring up beneath the tracks across the city, turning overlooked space in a crowded metropolis into the urban-planning equivalent of underbed storage. Here, in these makeshift cafes, businessmen gathered over bowls of beef tendon stew and onigiri rice balls, drinking sake and beer, united by camaraderie in a city being rebuilt.

Today, the same red-brick viaduct houses the commercial complex HIBIYA OKUROJI, the result of a redevelopment project in 2020. While the rumble of trains continues above, is no longer simply a string of sizzling grill counters, but a fully fledged shopping and dining arcade: visitors can enjoy everything from French patisseries and Michelin-awarded eel to premium kitchenware and indigo dyeing workshops. The project sought to preserve the historic space, turning its industrial architecture and dimly lit interiors into a retro-styled hub for creative entrepreneurs.

The *gādo-shita* continues to be reinterpreted for a modern audience elsewhere in the capital. Nakameguro Koukashita, along the Meguro River, is lauded as Tokyo's 'centre of cool', with a string of boutiques and galleries tucked beneath the railway; Ebisu Yokocho in Shibuya has welcomed a modern izakaya revival of micro-bars serving inventive cocktails. Meanwhile the 2k540 AKI-OKA ARTISAN, which opened in 2010, transformed a former warehouse and parking lot into a showcase for Japanese craftsmanship, featuring studios, workshops and shops devoted to leather, ceramics, textiles and jewellery.

Such as the cultural status of *gādo-shita* that their spirit exists even when not directly under the arches. Shimokitazawa's fittingly named BONUS TRACK occupies a former railway corridor, now home to small, independent shops, cafés, record stores and community spaces.

Far from temporary pop-ups, the improvised and resourceful spaces actually are synonymous with prime real estate: the permanence of the railway above adds a sense of security and continuity, making these spaces particularly attractive for long-term creative and commercial ventures. As cities around the world continue to grow, *gādo-shita* provides a lens for the future of urban space, where opportunity can exist where you least expect it.

To find out more, visit gotokyo.org

Tokyo Tokyo

LONDON'S BEST WHITE-TABLECLOTH RESTAURANTS

by JEREMY KING

SWANKY

HIERARCHY OF PLEASURES

SIMPLE

River Cafe, Hammersmith
Technically, this is not a "white-tablecloth" establishment as the table covers are paper, but I must give it dispensation because they were always intended to be used creatively by the late Richard Rogers and the cohorts of characters who visit. A tremendous restaurant with fine Italian cuisine; a classic in London. And, of course, luxurious.

Otto's, Holborn
Traditional French dining at its finest, this gloriously fits the bill. Distinctly and proudly old-fashioned, Otto's pairs excellent service with a homely, welcoming atmosphere. As for the food, don't miss the canard à la presse. It's a wonderful dish and worth the expense.

The Fat Badger, Notting Hill
This pub and restaurant is already a contemporary classic. It's showing the way forward in these difficult times with modern "fine dining" – as do the Public House Group's other establishments (The Bull in Charlbury, The Pelican and more). Be sure not to miss the perfectly cooked Hasselback potatoes.

Daquise, Kensington
For as long as I have lived in London, this traditional Polish restaurant has been one of my "go-to" places, a real gem. It's not only cheap (you can have lunch for about £20), but it's also atmospheric. There's a lot of history there – it dates back to 1947 – and the service is charming. Sadly, there have been reports that it might soon close, so get there while you can.

Terry's Café, Borough
The tablecloths here might be gingham rather than white, but the proper spirit of hospitality remains. It's a traditional London café and there's much to be admired. It's somewhere for a full English breakfast or a scallop and black pudding roll. And while the prices are low, the produce is excellent.

As told to Josh Barrie. Jeremy King is the proprietor of Arlington, The Park and Simpson's in the Strand

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INSIDER'S NOTEBOOK

An introduction to oyster-nomics

by JANE GLEESON

ILLUSTRATION *by* ALICE PIAGGIO

OCCASIONALLY, AFTER A WEEK HUNCHED OVER our desks, my partner and I dash down to our local neighbourhood restaurant, Inis, in Hackney Wick, to catch the final leg of happy hour: creamy pints of Guinness for £5 and £2 Donegal oysters. The Irish in me romanticises this pairing, while the marketer in me wonders how viable happy hour oysters are as a response to the hospitality crisis.

Restaurants across the UK seem to be folding at a worrying pace, with nearly 1,000 at risk of closing this year, according to the UK's hospitality trade body. Yet London is still brimming with cafés, restaurants and bars competing for custom. From Nessa in Soho to Prawn on the Lawn in Islington, an unlikely hero has been oysters.

The strategy was popularised by Wright Brothers, which whipped up buzz for its South Kensington opening back in 2015 with a "pound a pop" oyster happy hour. It's a promotion that's endured and even gone viral, most recently thanks to an influencer who polished off 80 oysters in an Instagram reel.

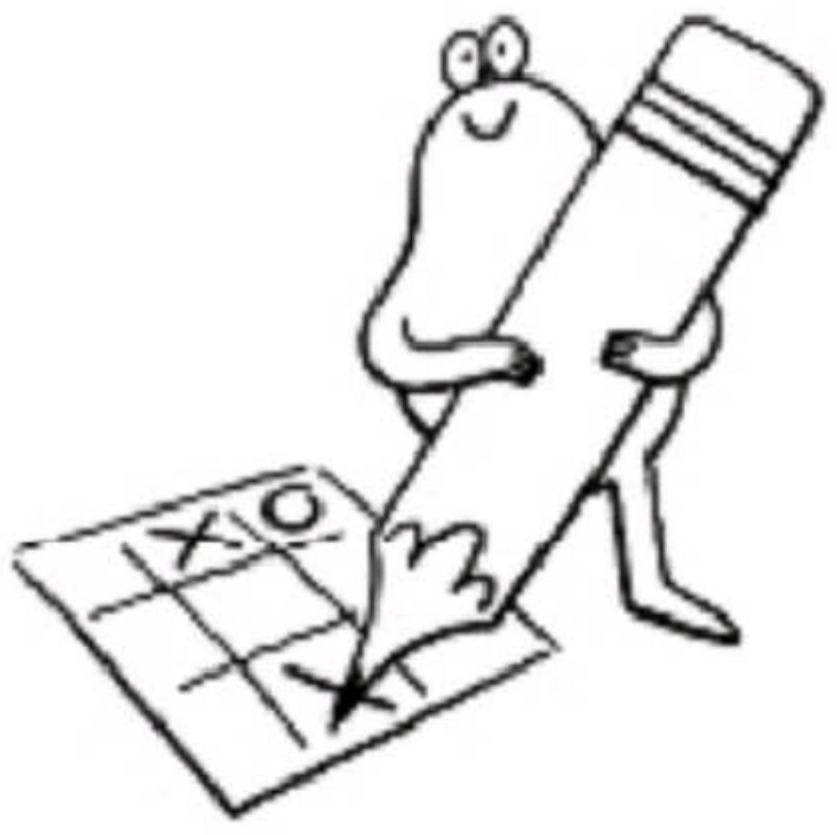
It helps that the glamorous bivalve looks great on social media. That's how east London restaurant Papi, with its £1 oysters, initially caught my attention on Instagram: "A-buck-a-shuck, Tuesday to Thursday" – 200 briny molluscs, and when they're gone, they're gone. Earlier this month, however, Papi announced its imminent closure, suggesting that even scroll-stopping promotions can't outrun the broader pinch.

Shortly before that news broke, I had chatted with co-owner Charlie Carr to suss out the rationale behind the happy hour. While some operators are jumping on platforms like First Table or Nightkey, which are designed to help fill restaurants during quieter times, Carr wanted to do something that made Papi a place people would think of midweek. And the results were clear: "We went from 10-15 covers to 30-40 on a Tuesday... Spend per head dropped from £75 to £40-£50, but overall, it's better. A full restaurant is happier and buzzier."

With oysters costing about 95p each wholesale, the £1 promotion was technically lossmaking. But, said Carr, "they come for oysters but stay for drinks – and almost always order something else".

Restaurateurs these days are stuck between a rock and a hard place. I see business owners second-guessing their pricing, increasing service charges and other add-ons, or investing in promotional tools without foresight. So I commend those who are braving this storm and coming up with creative solutions. Promotions like this give customers an affordable luxury when they, too, are feeling the pinch. But they're a smart lever in the short term – not a fix for what's really going on. FT

Jane Gleeson is the founder of Guzzle Magazine and a hospitality marketing consultant



GAMES

MINI CROSSWORD

NO 94 SET BY SLEUTH

8 clues
2 straightforward
2 general knowledge
2 cryptic
2 anagrams

1		2		3		4
	■		■		■	
5						
	■		■		■	
6						
	■		■		■	
7						

ACROSS

1 Lab note (7)
5 Greek island in the Cyclades (7)
6 Seeming thing done by peers? (7)
7 Sanctuaries (7)

DOWN

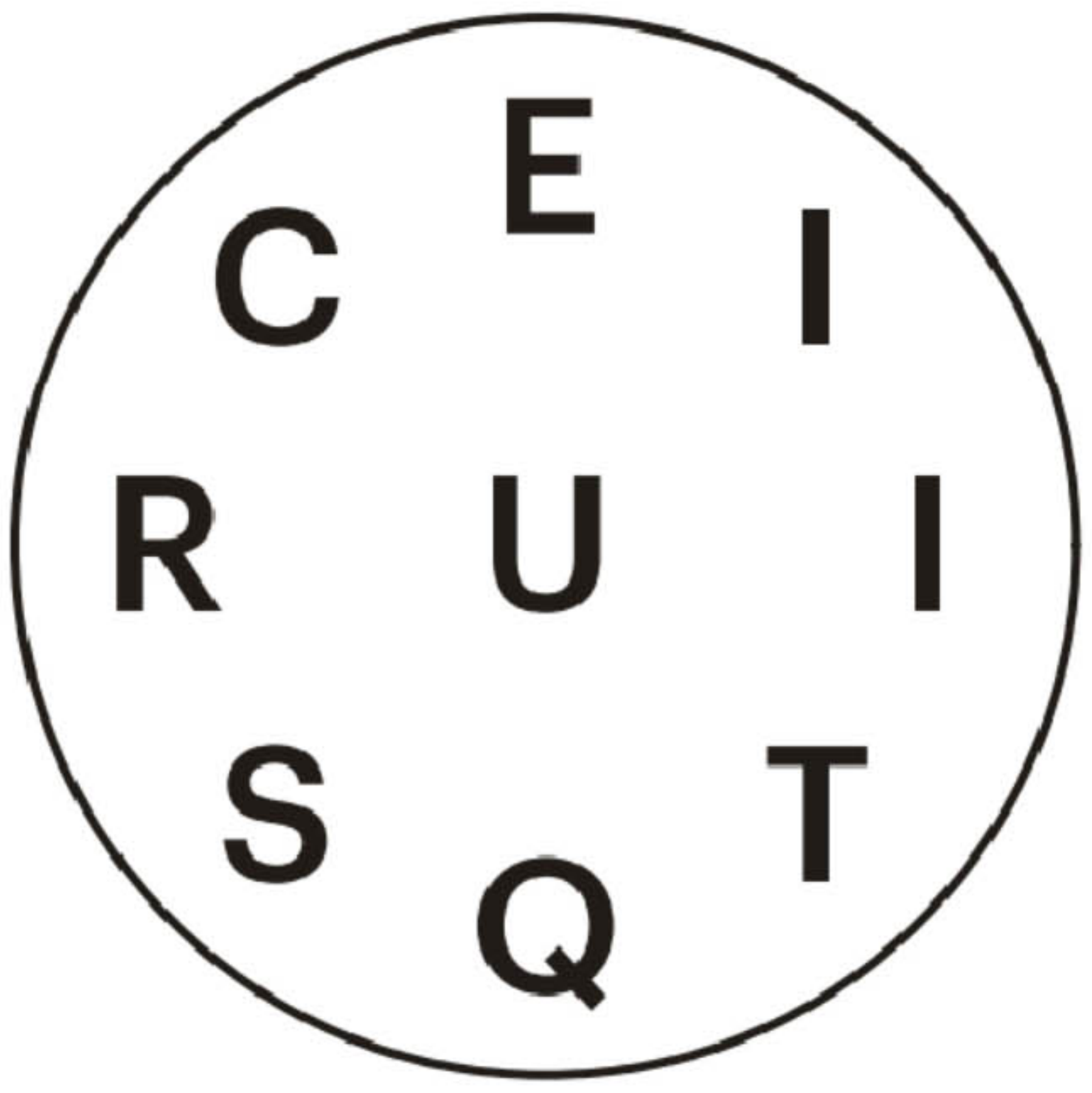
1 More agile (7)
2 Hastily depart shed (4,3)
3 A songbird related to the finches (7)
4 Sensing (7)

Access **FT** crosswords from the past 30 days – Cryptic, Polymath, Weekend and Sunday Puzzles – on ft.com/crosswordapp

WORD CIRCLE

NO 94

How many words can you form that use the centre letter plus two or more of the other letters? No letter may be used more times than it appears within the circle. There is one word that uses all nine letters.



SCORING
GOOD – 25
GREAT – 30
AMAZING – 40

BINARY PUZZLE

NO 94

Place 0 or 1 in every empty square so there is an equal number of each digit in every row and column. In any row or column, there must be no more than two of the same digit in succession.

1	0			0	0		
1				1			
	0			1		0	
0					1		0
1		0					1
	0		1			1	
			0				0
		0	1			0	0

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THIS WEEK'S QUIZ ANSWERS

A round on the links

The link was beds of various kinds

1. *The Sun Also Rises*
2. "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)"
3. Dead Sea 4. Justin Rose
5. *Birds of a Feather*
6. Camp David
7. Sick Boy 8. Heavy water
9. Apple pie
10. Bel Air

The picture round

Tom Holland + Syd Barrett = Holland & Barrett

SOLUTIONS

FOR ISSUE DATE JANUARY 24

Mini Crossword No 93

S	U	P	P	O	R	T
U	■	L	■	U	■	E
C	L	A	P	T	O	N
C	■	C	■	L	■	D
E	V	A	S	I	V	E
S	■	T	■	N	■	R
S	I	E	M	E	N	S

Binary Puzzle No 93

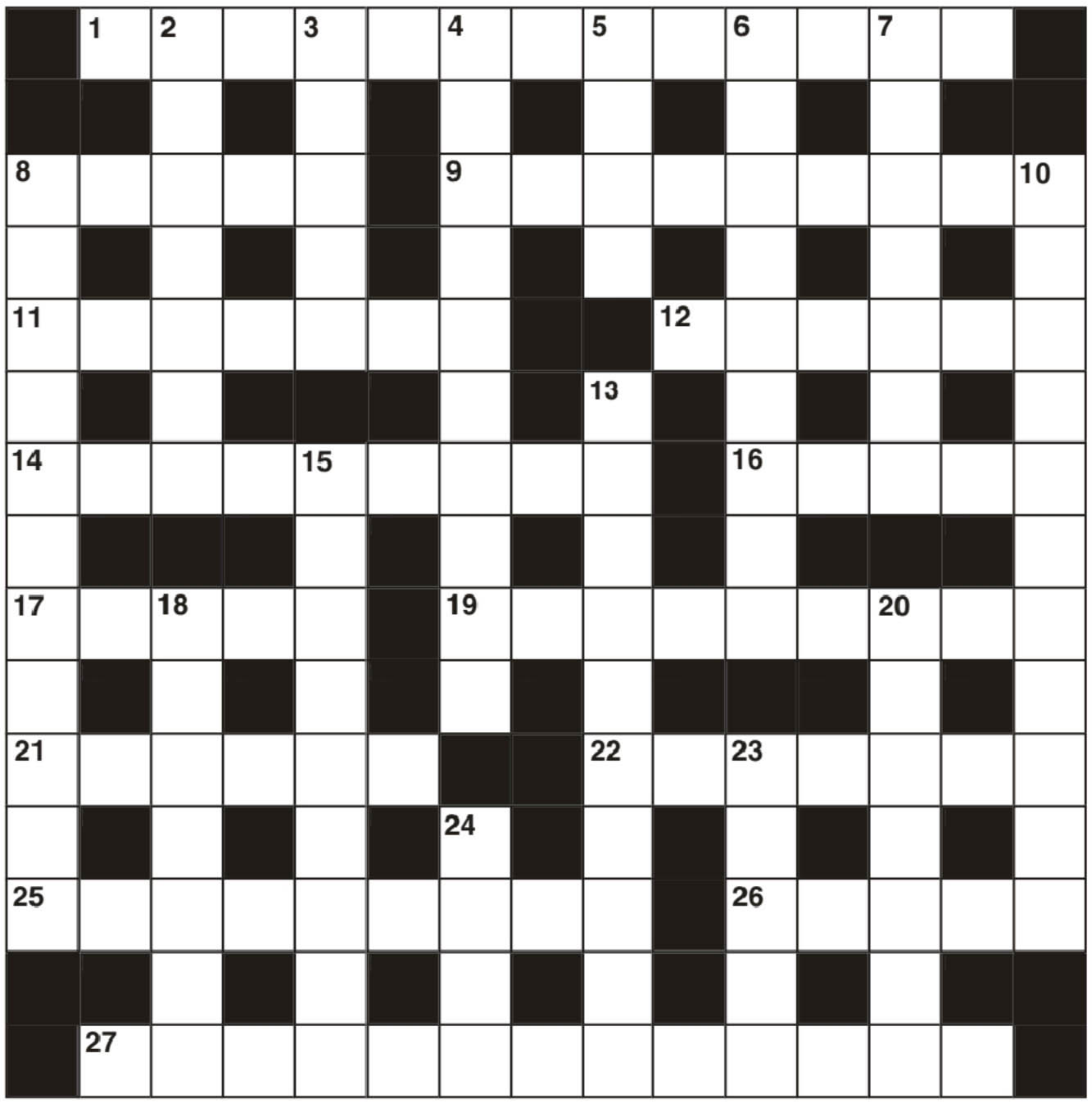
0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1
0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1
1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0
0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1
1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0
1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0

Word Circle No 93

ampere, are, arm, army, art, arty, ear, earn, eater, emery, enter, entrap, entry, era, ere, mar, mare, mart, marten, meaner, mere, meter, metre, nary, near, neater, pantry, par, pare, parent, part, party, payer, pear, peer, per, pert, peter, pram, prate, pray, preen, prey, pry pyre, ram, ramp, ran, rant, rap, rapt, rat, rate, ray, ream, reap, rename, rent, repay, **repayment**, repeat, repent, retype, rye, tamer, tamper, taper, tar, tare, tear, teary, temper, tempera, term, tern, tram, tramp, trap, tray, tree, try, tyre, yarn, year, yearn

THE CROSSWORD

NO 778 SET BY ALDHELM



The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

ACROSS

1 Hard work, industriousness (13)
8 Loyalty, faith (5)
9 Spotted dog (9)
11 Supreme ruler (7)
12 Reach (6)
14 One given a job (9)
16 Lifeless (5)
17 Chopped into small cubes (5)
19 Perseverance, devotion (9)
21 Italian city and *Romeo and Juliet* setting (6)
22 Allegorical bible story (7)
25 Simple physical comedy (9)
26 Push (5)
27 Lack of logic, incoherence (13)

DOWN

2 Pay must be adjusted over young creature (5, 2)
3 Bury in Lancashire ultimately captured by extremes of terror (5)
4 Replacement nurse is confused with duty doctor, initially (10)
5 Unattractive fruit for the audience (4)
6 Lean into terrible anger – that's a close call (4, 5)
7 Exotic mushroom punch in Japanese spirit (7)
8 Have unwound with mildest holiday destination (3, 8)
10 One's hens get let out, however (11)
13 Refined charm roused for Spooner (4-6)
15 State aid one's arranged after popular start (9)
18 Pirate's rough tune is heard (7)
20 Belts out number, at first, that's most magnificent (7)
23 Push away piano in part of film (5)
24 Skirt motorway in Italy (4)

Crossword No 777

A	T	T	A	C	H	■	D	E	S	P	O	T	I	C
■	R	■	U	■	E	■	I	■	■	A	■	O	■	O
H	O	N	D	U	R	A	S	■	T	R	U	I	S	M
■	U	■	I	■	E	■	S	■	■	A	■	L	■	A
A	B	S	E	N	T	E	E	■	A	S	C	E	N	T
■	L	■	N	■	I	■	C	■	■	O	■	T	■	O
■	E	■	C	O	C	K	T	A	I	L	■	R	■	S
I	D	L	E	■	A	■	■	■	R	■	H	Y	P	E
N	■	E	■	P	L	E	T	H	O	R	A	■	L	■
C	■	A	■	A	■	■	O	■	N	■	V	■	O	■
A	S	P	I	R	E	■	R	E	C	R	E	A	T	E
M	■	F	■	A	■	■	R	■	R	■	N	■	L	■
E	N	R	A	G	E	■	E	C	O	N	O	M	I	C
R	■	O	■	O	■	■	N	■	S	■	T	■	N	■
A	R	G	O	N	A	U	T	■	S	I	S	T	E	R

A ROUND ON THE LINKS

BY JAMES WALTON

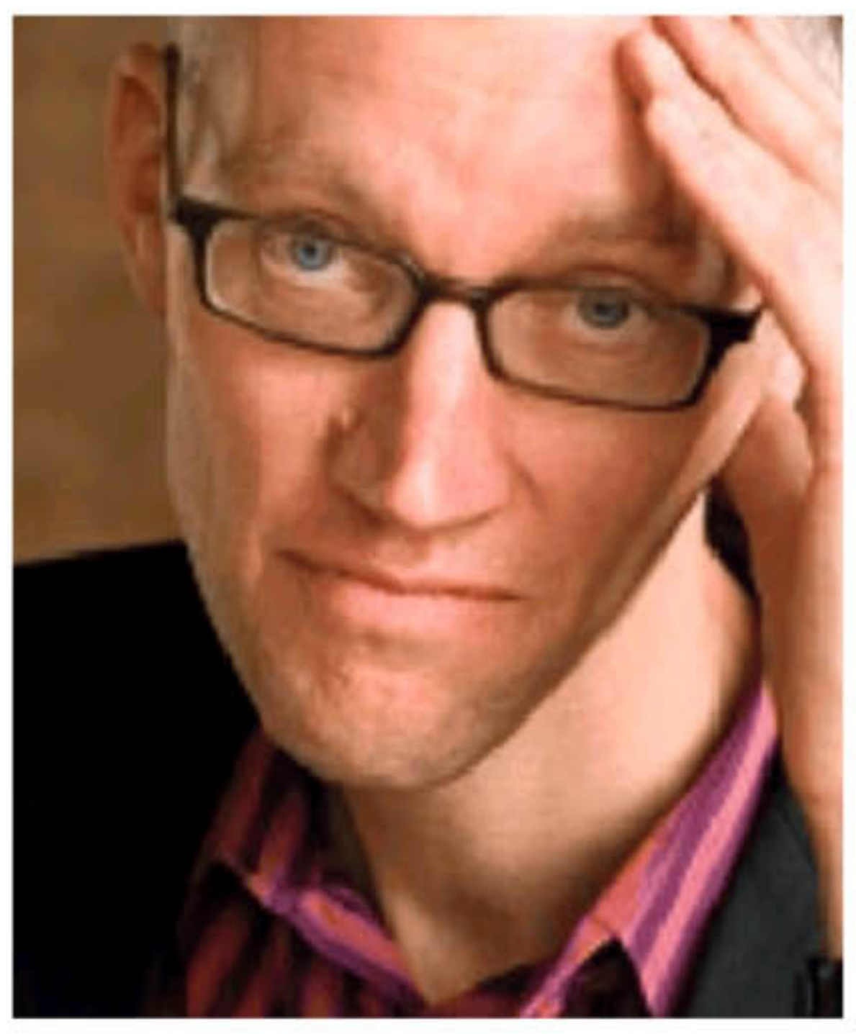
All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the connection, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

1 What's the title of Ernest Hemingway's first novel, initially published in the UK as *Fiesta*?
2 Which song by Beyoncé won the 2010 Grammy for Song of the Year?
3 Which Asian lake is the lowest point on the Earth's surface?
4 Which British golfer's only win in a Major tournament was the 2013 US Open?
5 Stubbs and Theodopolopodous were the surnames of the sisters in which hit British sitcom of the 1990s?
6 Which official US presidential retreat is in Maryland?
7 What's the nickname of the character Simon Williamson in *Trainspotting* (*pictured*)?
8 What's the common two-word name for deuterium oxide, a liquid used in nuclear reactors – and whose manufacture in Norway by the Germans was sabotaged by Allied commandos during the second world war?
9 When asked what they were fighting for in the second world war, the traditional stock answer of American soldiers was, "For mom and…" what?
10 The wealthy neighbourhoods in Los Angeles known as the three Bs are Brentwood, Beverly Hills – and what?

THE PICTURE ROUND

BY JAMES WALTON

Who or what do these pictures add up to?



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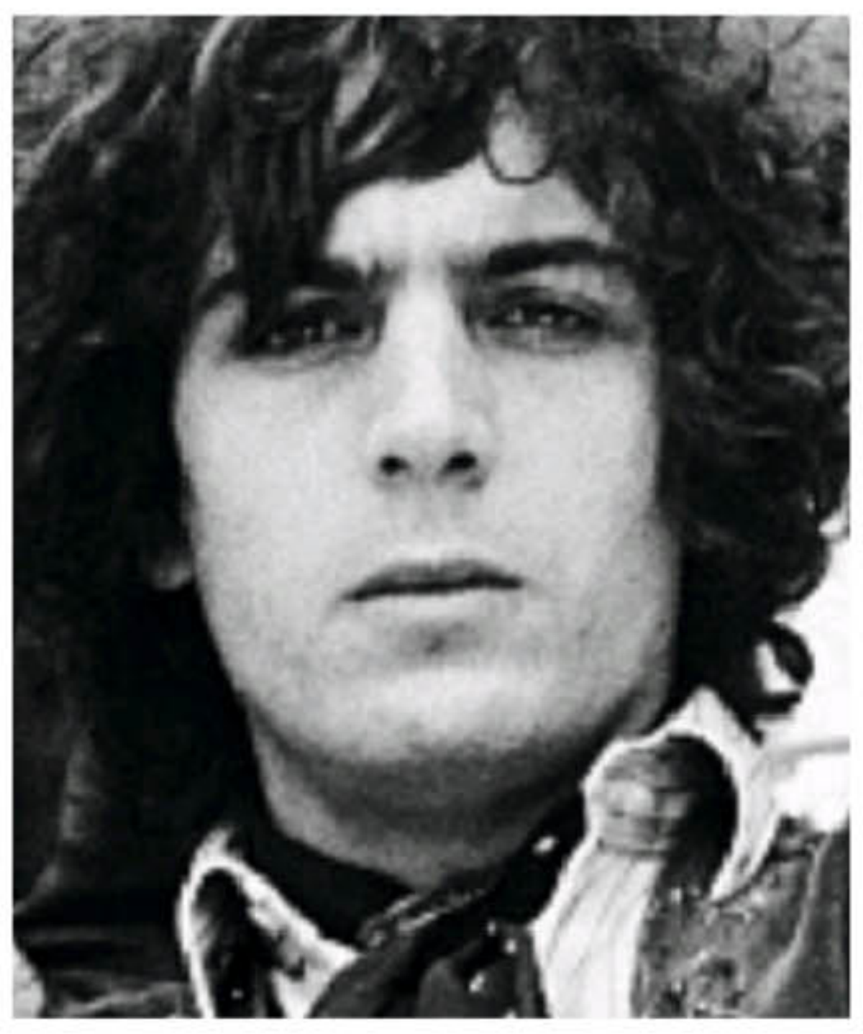

= ?

Answers opposite

What Fresh Hell

Should I hire someone with designs on my job?

Work, life and family dilemmas solved by *Robert Shrimsley*

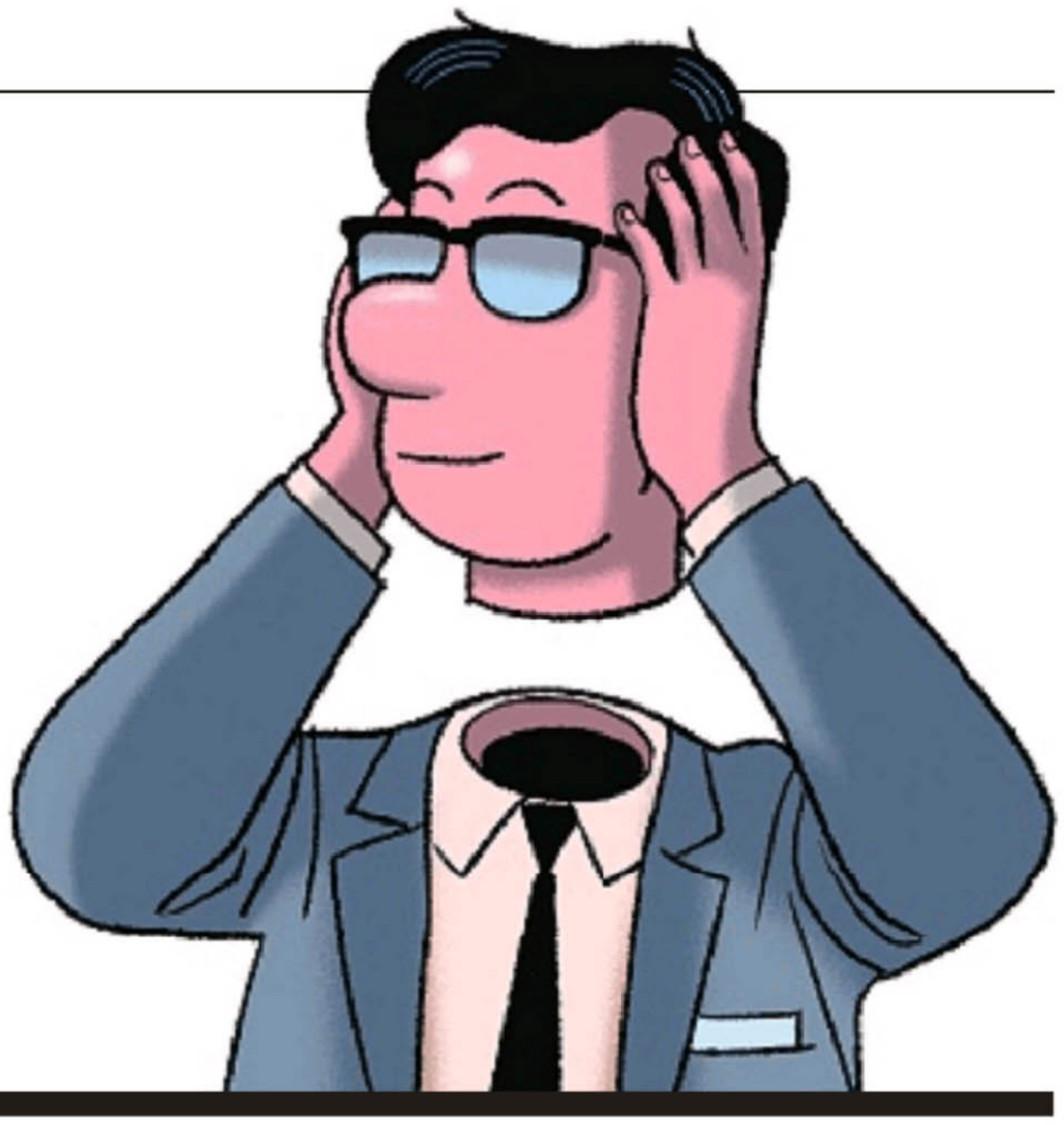

ILLUSTRATION *by* LUCAS VARELA

Well, Sir Keir, this is a tough one. Of course, the prime minister did not need my help in answering this question last week, when he stitched up his would-be rival Andy Burnham, blocking the mayor of Manchester from returning to parliament as an MP. Starmer's choice was admittedly made slightly easier by the fact that the subtext to his every political intervention has been, "I am coming to destroy you."

He may be flawed but Starmer was not about to be the little pig who voluntarily admitted the big bad wolf. I must admit I liked Burnham's exciting new political agenda of "Manchesterism". Actually, his plan for the country to copy good things about Manchester is quite similar to my own policy of Richmondism with its agenda of riverside cafés, royal parks and nice houses – implementation details to follow.

What makes the Burnham issue fascinating to those not obsessed with Manchesterism is that managing an ambitious subordinate is one of the great dilemmas of working life. There are whole bookcases devoted to this issue and, let me tell you, I've read none of them.

I have, however, read Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* so I know that it is often best if "your plans be dark and impenetrable as night and... fall like a thunderbolt". Terrific advice, until you remember you are dealing with Steve from legal services rather than the warring states of Qin, Chu and Zhao. Alas, *The Art of War* contains few chapters about the colleague who sends round-robin emails that appear to take the credit for your work.

Happily, I have been working on translations of the other nine of Sun Tzu's until-recently-lost self-help books, part of a 10-volume "The Art of" series, which culminates in *The Art of Extending the Franchise*. So, in answer to your question: the issue is tricky because a team full of staff without ambition will limit your own success. As Sun Tzu puts it in *The Art of Managing Downwards*: "An army which marches without hunger will probably be satisfied with a McDonald's."

In deciding whether to hire or advance a potential rival, there are essentially two metrics. How secure do you feel and how much of a snake do you think they are? Open ambition is entirely respectable. Someone who wants to do well is more likely to improve your team and, thus, your own reputation. There is the danger that your company may come to value them more than you. But the question is whether you can sweat them long enough to make it worth the risk and then recommend them for a senior role in another division. To borrow from Sun Tzu's *The Art of Catering*: "If your sous-chef's blade is sharper than yours, make him VP of dicing carrots."

> Starmer was not about to be the little pig who voluntarily admitted the big bad wolf

An alternative tactic is to find a second ambitious deputy so they spend their time fighting each other rather than you. Remember: "The fire consumes the kindling first," Sun Tzu, *The Art of Camping*. Also, they may fear to act until they are sure they will be the beneficiary. "The ambitious deputy fears not conflict but uncertainty. He who strikes without ensuring supremacy invites his own undoing," *The Art of Streeting*.

Distinguish between ambition and treachery. Does the applicant really want the job on offer or yours? One feels Starmer sensed Burnham's primary interest perhaps wasn't being MP for Gorton and Denton.

Deal mercilessly with back-stabbers. As Sun Tzu will shortly be observing: "Reward the loyal, expose the false and put the treacherous in charge of special projects." If you realise your lieutenant is playing games, you must manage your brand upwards better than they manage theirs. I cannot top Sun Tzu's notes in the *The Art of PR for the Beckhams*: "A wise soldier never claims first dance with the bride at someone else's wedding."

If you seem to be on an upward trajectory, you may convince your deputy to hitch themselves to your wagon. This is trickier if you are already at the top and have nowhere else to go, but perhaps you can invent a new and well-rewarded role which those who seek your chair – and benediction – will be happy to create for you.

Always see the bigger picture, remembering that your employer's interests are indistinguishable from your own. As Sun Tzu, quoting the eminent physician Dr Hou-se, reminds us in *The Art of Motivational Speaking*: "There may be no I in team, but two of its letters can be arranged to spell me." FT

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